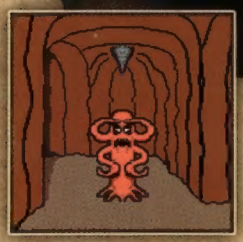
23 GAMES REVIEWED • AGE OF MYTHOLOGY

Computer Games

Rings & Things

Tolkien's World & PC Gaming

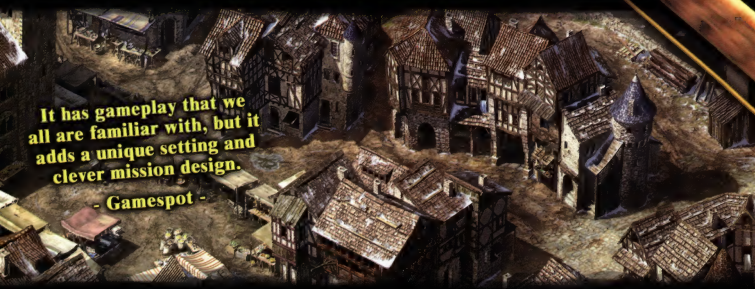
Plus the Next Lord of the Rings Games



A HISTORY OF COMPUTER RPGs FROM ULTIMA TO WIZARDRY

NO. 146 / JANUARY 2003

LIVE THE LEGEND...

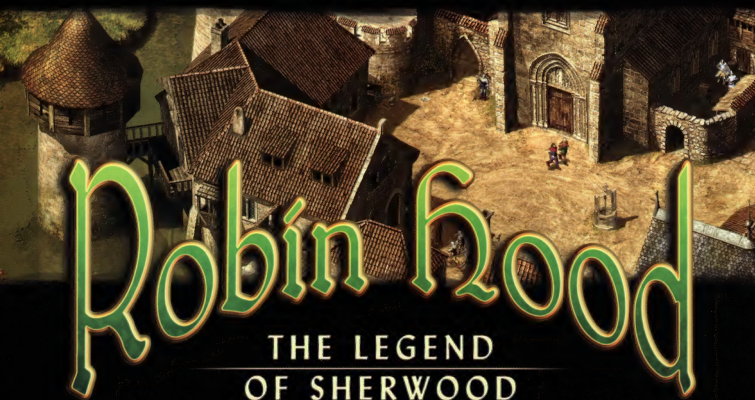


Fun and dynamic gameplay

Use cunning or might to complete missions

Play as Robin Hood, Little John, Maid Marian and others

Stunning graphics and realistic atmospheric conditions



Robin Hood

THE LEGEND OF SHERWOOD

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ESRB TEEN T Violence

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Violence

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Blood
Violence

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BY DANIEL GREENBERG AND NEIL RANDALL

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By The Developers of the Award-Winning Imperium Galactica™ and Imperium Galactica™ II

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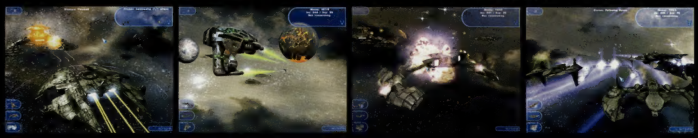

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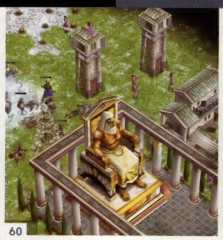

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It's trashy. It's tacky. It's good (no joke).
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Taking out the Trash

Trailer Park Tycoon: It's tacky. It's good (no joke). This oddly appealing strategy game puts the "trash" in "trashtactular."

Also this month:
Need for Speed Hot Pursuit 2
Emperor: Arx Fatalis
FIFA 2003, Robin Hood
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WITH WORDS

THE UNITED NATIONS SECURITY COUNCIL:

Established in Geneva (1945), this center for diplomacy and the peaceful settlement of international disputes has had a spotty record. In times of global crisis, the United Nations does their best to prevent armed conflict. All too often, however, it is not enough.

WORDS LIKE:
"CARPET BOMBING," "SCUD LAUNCHERS"

By PETER CROSBY

Recent military aggressions around the globe have many nation's worried. Between the United States, China and the Global Liberation Army, tensions run high. Their leaders profess no interest in escalating the situation, but words ring hollow when satellite photos tell a different story. The issue is no longer *"Will* there be military conflict?" but, "Who will *prevail?"*

CHINA:

No longer just a red-communist step-child, China's modern army is well-financed with a strong nationalistic bent. Parading technology like Dragon Tanks and Nuclear Missiles, China's military goes beyond large troop numbers. But defeating the agile GLA is still no walk in Yangmingshan National Park. So while their new military is formidable, so is the task ahead.

TEEN T
CONTENT RATED BY ESRB
Violence
PC CD ROM

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THE WILD CARD:

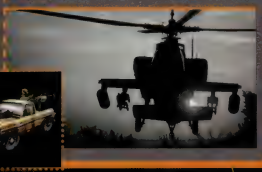
Despite inferior military resources, the GLA still poses a very credible threat to worldwide security.

GLOBAL LIBERATION ARMY:

Facing superior firepower, the GLA embraces bio-terrorism, sabotage and suicide bombings to further its political agenda. But leading a chaotic group of "freedom" fighters against two global super-powers will take some doing.

LIMITED FORCES:

Roused by GLA bio-terrorism attacks, the U.S. must now act decisively. America's military leader faces the unenviable task of rooting out an elusive foe. The world's most advanced military — armed with Daisy-Cutter bombs and Comanche Gunships — will make the job easier. But eradicating the cell-based GLA will also take courage, conviction and the will to see a prolonged campaign through to the end.



TECHNOLOGICAL ADVANTAGE:

Despite the difference in resources, all three forces achieve an eerie kind of parity. The GLA's low-tech approach is no less effective than either China's superior forces or America's advanced technologies.

AND "TOMAHAWK MISSILES."

COMMAND & CONQUER
GENERALS
February 11th, 2003

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Immerse yourself in the lives of your Sims...

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EA GAMES

STEVE BAUMAN

upfront

pure sex!

The new sensation: reports on gaming reach new heights in number of reports, but lows in accuracy and fairness

Writing a sensationalist headline to get you to read an article or pay attention to some news story is a cheap tactic. While the one used above is particularly awful—and not terribly original either—the headline "Army Recruits Teens with Internet Sniper Game" used on ABCNews.com, and uttered by Peter Jennings while introducing a segment about *America's Army* on *ABC World News Tonight*, is a perfect example of how the media manipulates its gaming coverage.

I was actually a small part of this story on ABC; at least I spoke with someone from the show about the topic earlier that day. I suspected the piece would be sensationalistic, despite the nature of the conversation, and sure enough, it was. It was terrible, leaving comments from lawyer and anti-videogame crusader Jack Thompson about *America's Army* such as "While the defense department was trying to find the serial sniper in the Washington D.C. area, they were training new snipers to take their place" completely unchallenged.

It wouldn't be hard to debunk an ill-informed comment like that; the game isn't a sniper simulation, and the amount of skill required to qualify as a sniper in the game probably filters out a large number of its players. Had I been part of the report, I might have also said, "Unless there's an all-new mouse and keyboard version of the M16, I'm not sure my years of computer training make me a better marksman." Whatever "realism" exists in a game like *America's Army*, there's no mechanical correlation to using a mouse and a rifle.

> "Unless there's an all-new mouse and keyboard version of the M16, I'm not sure my years of computer training make me a better marksman."

It got worse. "I'm a father of a 10-year-old boy," Thompson said, "and every day I drop him off at school, I know that he's at greater risk because some of this classmates, as well as others in the general population, train obsessively in these shooter games." Ignoring the moral repugnance of using the "child in peril" argument to make your point, the report could have mentioned the statistic about the drop in violent crime among school-age children that occurred simultaneously with the increase in violent gaming. It's just as specious for me to draw any correlation between those two things as Thompson does with his comments about games as trainers, yet again, he wasn't called on it.

A few weeks before the ABCNews piece, I had a surreal discussion with a producer from *20/20* during the height of the DC sniper madness. Apparently, they had some hot lead that the sniper was a gamer, natch, and that the comment "I am God," was in reference to *Populous*, of all things. I talked at length to the woman about the "God Game" genre, how games like *Age of Empires* and *SimCity* didn't really fall into the more literal interpretation of that genre, but apparently, that lead went nowhere and the story never appeared.

In all of these cases, and with other discussions with CNN, I've come close to appearing as a talking head on a number of occasions. Though I'm always concerned about gaming at least getting a fair shake in the mainstream, one important question keeps popping into my head about appearing in this capacity on TV: if it's true that the camera adds 15 pounds to the anorexic starlets gracing the small screen, does that scale up depending on the weight of the person? Assuming someone like Calista Flockhart weighs about 75 pounds—seeing as how she looks like she weighs about 90—with the 15 pounds added to her equal 50 added to me, as I weigh roughly three times as much? For the love of Twinkies, I'd look like I weighed nearly 300 pounds on TV! I'd better start working out.

In fact, after I'm done with my sniper training in *America's Army*, I'm back to working on my curveball with *High Heat*, my jump shot with *NBA Live*, and tightening my spiral with *Madden*. This should burn off a few excessive calories and get me into shape. With this rigorous and obsessive training regiment in place, I'm following Thompson's lead in adapting my game skills to real life. Wish me luck as I enter the drafts of all three sports next year; hopefully I won't look fat on ESPN's draft day coverage. ●

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MYTHIC ENTERTAINMENT

Public Acclaim

Acclaim reaches new heights—or lows—in courting attention for its game lineup

by Andrew S. Bub

"There's no such thing as bad press," or so the saying goes, but that doesn't always ring true on Madison Avenue. There are plenty of companies who, despite solid products, were sunk by a single controversial misstep. While notoriety can translate into sales, its employ is a risky proposition.

> "Acclaim CEO Greg Fishbach describes the game as a 'humorous product' that is 'truly on par with such widely accepted mainstream entertainment experiences, including movies like American Pie...'"

Acclaim Entertainment is no stranger to controversy. Over the past few months, it's managed to get its name and product into newspapers with one outrageous stunt after another. It began in March 2002, when the company offered to buy advertising space on local gravestones in England for *Shadowman 2*, a voodoo-inspired third-person action game. At the time, a spokesman for Acclaim said, "payments would be calculated with regard to the exposure potential of any particular headstone" and dismissed the notion that this was a media stunt. It reasoned, outrageously, that using a loved one's headstone might help mitigate burial costs for poorer families. Later, spokesperson Shaun White dubbed the gimmick "deadvertising," and the resulting publicity drew the derision of local authorities and the Anglican Church. The Guardian Unlimited claims that nobody took Acclaim up on the offer.

For it's next trick, the company offered a $10,000 savings bond to the parents of the first child born on September 1st, 2002 to name their baby "Turok" as part of the publicity for its *Turok Evolution*, which was released a few days later. At that time, Acclaim's spokesperson, Alan Lewis, warned parents not to name their child Turok until the company could verify that their child was born first, "unless they were inclined to anyway." Meanwhile back in England, Acclaim's UK division offered 500 pounds, an Xbox console, and a copy of *Turok Evolution* to five people who would legally change their name to "Turok" for a full year. "We were looking for applicants who wanted to experience the kudos of being pioneers in advertising, who are willing to step beyond the leading edge of marketing practice," said Shaun White who dubbed the this Identity Advertising. The gimmick worked, and there are, for at least the next year or so, five people named Turok in the UK and at least one infant of the same name in the United States.

In more recent news, Acclaim announced *BMX XXX*, a biking game for the Xbox and PlayStation 2, which was released in November. It presumably features some BMX biking, but the focus has been on its inclusion of urinating animals and topless women, though at press time, Acclaim announced it would ship on November 15th, minus any nudity.

Before its release, Acclaim CEO Greg Fishbach described the game as a "humorous product" that is "truly on par with such widely accepted mainstream

entertainment experiences, including movies like *American Pie*, and TV shows like *The Sopranos* and *Sex and the City*." He added that the game was not designed for, nor is it being marketed to consumers under the age of 17. "We fully support the Electronic Software Rating Board and encourage consumers to utilize their rating systems to make educated purchases," he said, though you have to wonder about his sincerity when his company offered some protest, and outrage, when chains like Toys R Us and Wal-Mart refused to stock the game. (Both those chains refuse to stock M-rated products as a matter of general policy, though Wal-Mart does sell M-rated games like *Diablo II* and *Grand Theft Auto III*.)

Acclaim's spokespeople wouldn't comment on this story, but an anonymous source at the company explained that the marketing department took notice when *Grand Theft Auto III* went from controversy to one of the best selling video game ever made in the space of just a month or two. "Acclaim isn't the most successful videogame maker out there," he said, noting the company does well but doesn't have any real mega-hits. "Marketing feels we need attention and the best way to get it, especially from young people, is to be controversial and edgy, just like *Grand Theft Auto III*." Whether the phenomenal success of Rockstar's smash hit is due to its "edginess" or merely the high quality of its gameplay is certainly open for debate.

Oscar Wilde once wrote, "The only thing worse than being talked about, is not being talked about." If that's your marketing strategy, the question remains is how high, or depending on your perspective on things like urination, babies named "Turok," and gravestone ads, how low can you go? ●

Leaks of DOOM

Dubbed "The most anticipated game in history" by noted gaming authority "The Drudge Report," an early version of *DOOM III* shown to the press last May at the Electronic Entertainment Expo somehow made its way onto the Internet in November. id Software's John Carmack said he was upset over the leak, and recommended people avoid making any judgments on this "snapshot intended for a non-interactive demo."

Strike (Fighters) Two

After a disastrous release, Strike Fighters limps to store shelves

by Denny Atkin

Strike Fighters: *Project 1* seemed to have the makings of a hit. Designed by Tsuyoshi "TK" Kawahito, a key developer on such classics as *Jane's Longbow 2* and *European Air War*, it's the first flight simulator visit Vietnam-era aircraft since *US Navy Fighters '97*.

Its initial release did get the attention of the community, but not in a good way. Available exclusively at Wal-Mart, this version, reviewed in the November issue, was far more interesting as an illustration of what a game looks like in a late "alpha" form than as an actual final, shipping product. Publisher Strategy First called it a "special release" for the retail chain, while developer Third Wire Productions said it was based on a late-June unfinished beta. Arguments ensued as to where the blame should fall, but in the end, it was gamers who were disappointed.

After the negative PR and backlash, you'd expect a rock-solid release. While the version on shelves at the end of October was essentially feature-complete, it remains chock-full of bugs, odd AI behaviors, and other irritations. For instance, anti-aircraft guns and surface-to-air missiles—which worked in the beta—were inadvertently disabled in release version. There are also occasional graphics glitches, as well as crashes to desktop in multiplayer mode.

Sim pilots willing to put up with the problems and wait for inevitable patches (the first was slated for release just a week after the game hit shelves) will at least find a lot more to like here than in the Wal-Mart version. You can fly four 60's-era airplanes: the F-4 Phantom II, A-4 Skyhawk, F-100 Super Sabre, and the F-104 Starfighter. The flight models and instrumentation are realistic enough to be convincing, but not overwhelming for casual gamers. Aircraft look stunning, and special effects are impressive, but the desert terrain used for the single dynamic campaign is dull. The combat experience in these early, heavy jets is sufficiently different from other current flight games that serious fans and aviation buffs will find that the game's novelty makes it worth picking up. Others will want to wait to see if future patches result in a game that's finally finished and debugged. ●

Purchasers of the "Wal-Mart version" can get a free upgrade to the final release by emailing market@strategyfirst.com; you'll have to fax them a copy of your receipt or original CD.

WHAT ARE YOU PLAYING?

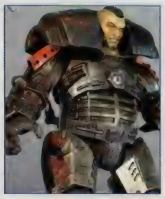
Scott Miller
Co-founder/CEO, 3D Realms

"Just finished *Turok* on the Xbox. It represents utter design failure, but I had to play it because it's similar to a project I'm working on. Was also playing *Mafia*, but quit due to no mid-mission save games—it's too tedious for me to keep driving those long distances more than once. Boredom should not be a part of gameplay. So now I'm half-way through *Star Fox* and loving it. Very good level design, good story, compelling gameplay, and a save-anywhere feature that keeps me from replaying a section until I fall asleep!"

Petri Jarvilehto
Lead Game Designer, Remedy Entertainment

"Currently I'm playing *Grand Theft Auto: Vice City* (who isn't?), and yeah, the 80s theme, story and motorcycles all do it for me. Having just finished *The Thing* and playing *Mafia*, I'm really enjoying playing a game that doesn't take itself too seriously... and while we're at the subject of not being too serious, four player Monkey Tennis in *Monkey Ball 2* is like distilled fun."

SPOTLIGHT



Hyperreal Figures
Unreal Universe Series
www.radioactiveclown.com

It's hard to imagine anyone playing *Unreal Tournament 2003* not thinking, "My life would be complete if I could have one of these grotesquely overdesigned stereotypical cartoon models in action-figure form sitting on my desk." In March of 2003, Radioactive Clown will fulfill the needs of a nation of gamers with the Unreal Universe Series of action figures. The first batch includes Gorge (pictured), Damarus, and Mother V. Each figure will be armed with an assault rifle that can be swapped out for that particular character's specialty weapon. For Gorge—who's appeared on three different magazine covers, stars in Intel's current ad campaign, and is developing the reputation of being something of a prima donna model type—he gets a rocket launcher. Radioactive Clown also has a line of figures from *Rune*, though no one is quite sure why.

TOP SELLERS

1	THE SIMS UNLEASHED Electronic Arts Not Rated
2	BATTLEFIELD 1942 Electronic Arts Rating ★★★★½
3	WARCRAFT III: REIGN OF CHAOS Vivendi Universal Rating ★★★★
4	UNREAL TOURNAMENT 2003 Infogrames Rating ★★★
5	THE SIMS VACATION Electronic Arts Rating ★★½
6	THE SIMS DELUXE Electronic Arts Not Rated
7	THE SIMS Electronic Arts Rating ★★★★½
8	ROLLER COASTER TYCOON Infogrames Rating ★★★★½
9	MAFIA Gathering of Developers Rating ★★★★
10	ZOO TYCOON Microsoft Rating ★★★★½

11. The Sims Hot Date; 12. Medieval: Total War; 13. Medal Of Honor: Allied Assault; 14. Icewind Dale 2; 15. Sponge Bob Square Pants: Operation Krabby Patty; 16. Madden NFL 2003; 17. Harry Potter & The Sorcerer's Stone; 18. Sim Theme Park World; 19. Backyard Baseball 2003; 20. Grand Theft Auto III

Source: NPD INTELECT® Market Tracking. The December list is based on units sold by forty-two retail chains, representing more than 80% of the U.S. market.

OFFBEAT

Gamer Fuel
Bawls Guarana
www.bawls.com

Bawls Guarana, the most caffeinated beverage on the market (at least according to its manufacturer), is hitching itself to the fickle gaming world. Claiming "50%" of its success to the "gaming subculture," the drink gives players the "revitalizing energy buzz that gets them through the 12-48 hours of attentive competitive gaming." Though anyone playing competitive games for 48 hours straight has a few more pressing concerns than falling asleep, the beverage company has sponsored the Cyberathlete Professional League and over 25,000 LAN parties, is featured in the PlayStation 2 game *Run Like Hell*, and is now available nationally at CompUSA. Mix this surprisingly tasty and light drink (compared to Red Bull, at least) with some ephedra-based diet pills and you may never need to sleep again. Insanity, or a heart attack, awaits. (And please note: we didn't make a single joke about the product's name.)

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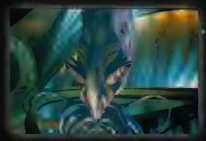

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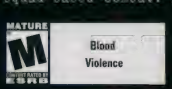


Tom Clancy's
RAINBOW SIX 3
RAVEN SHIELD
www.raven-shield.com

Just to show the amount of detail in the game, School buses surround the museum during the day as your younger sims go on field trips.

The Mayor of Sims-pleton

Maxis readies the latest edition of the series that opened the doors to the wacky SimUniverse

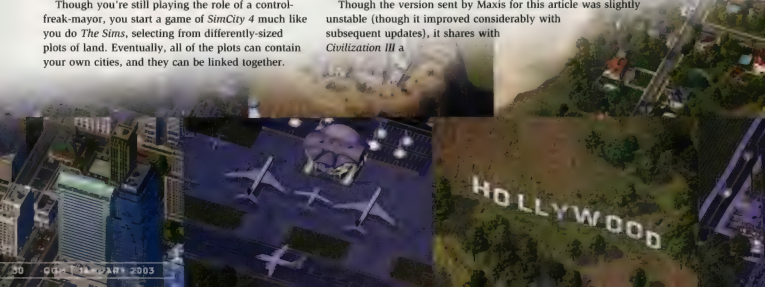
by Steve Bauman

The slightly deranged people at Maxis are once again hitting the streets of SimCity with an updated and all-new *SimCity*. Scheduled for release in the middle of January, *SimCity 4* represents a more radical re-thinking of the series than the more evolutionary *2000* and *3000*, with beautiful 3D graphics (though still fixed in place without a free-moving camera), a stylish interface, and plenty of evolutionary changes designed to make the game easier to play while retaining its considerable depth.

Though you're still playing the role of a control-freak-mayor, you start a game of *SimCity 4* much like you do *The Sims*, selecting from differently-sized plots of land. Eventually, all of the plots can contain your own cities, and they can be linked together.

Once you've selected a plot, the game lets you create the landscape of your city building dreams. It's hard to put a finger on what's specifically so entertaining about terraforming terrain—maybe it's just a manifestation of a "god" complex—but laying the groundwork for your city is practically a game itself. You can create mountains, valleys, and rivers, forest other areas, and click on buttons to smooth out and erode areas to produce realistic and natural landscapes. Once your city is up and running, you can also head back into this tool and unleash hell by dropping tornados or volcanoes on Main St., or launch your own giant robot attack. You might even consider plunking a volcano down in the middle of a blank spot of land to create a more interesting initial landscape for your future metropolis. As art director Ocean Quigley said in an online article on the game's official site (simcity.ea.com), "If creating things is fun, wreaking havoc on them is even better."

Though the version sent by Maxis for this article was slightly unstable (though it improved considerably with subsequent updates), it shares with *Civilization III* a



feeling of being simultaneously similar and different. Visually, it just looks phenomenal. The cities are considerably more alive than in past versions, with more detail in traffic—both vehicular and foot—and in seeing your sims milling about at school, at sporting events, or shopping and working. The performance, even on a high-end machine, is suspect as all that amazing detail has its cost—this isn't your standard *SimCity*, or even *The Sims*. Judging an unoptimized engine too harshly is dicey, though, and in usual fashion, Maxis pre-calculates a lot of important elements of the game in order to boost performance, and in id Software fashion, tells you exactly what it's doing at all times, with the most high-tech language imaginable. Tweakers, in particular, should be ecstatic to know they pre-calculate all "llama expectoration trajectories." And those llamas spit a lot.

The interface, which is radically different, offers all of the options you expect despite a superficial resemblance to the considerably simpler interface of *The Sims*. The fact the game actually has a "User Interface Designer" (Christian Stratton—his article on the official site is definitely worth reading if you're interested in interface theory) shows how serious Maxis is about creating eminently playable games.

The basic game remains the same: zone areas of land for residential, commercial, or industrial development, build power plants and send some juice your city's way, setup some underground piping for water, manage your traffic, set your taxes, and watch as all of your well-planned ideas go to hell. Roads are now created automatically when you zone, removing some tedium (those really into aesthetics can tweak them to their anal little heart's content), and a foliage tool lets you "paint" trees all over your city. There are improved highways, enormous farms, your sims still whine about everything (don't like living next to the dump? Move!), have a tendency to riot when really angry, and you can now import your whiny *Sims* characters to give you even more advice.

Despite all of the changes, *SimCity 4* is unmistakably *SimCity*, and still a game that Quigley eloquently calls "a palette upon which you paint the world as you would like it to be." ●

It's all in the details: SimCity 4 ups the ante with its amazing visuals.

WWW.COONLINE.COM

Shattered Galaxy 1.5

This online real-time strategy game is taking a baby step toward its next full release. It introduces renovated and rebalanced units, new interfaces, and separates its units into two technology sets. (Nexon)

Knight Shift

This combination role-playing/real-time strategy game will feature 20 missions over three campaigns, skill-based combat and magic systems, and a multiplayer mode for up to eight players. (Reality Pump)

Will Rock

Not to be confused with Serious Sam, which it disturbingly resembles, you're Wilford Rockwell, facing off against mythological enemies. It features "real-time shattering" technology, meaning you can break stuff. (UbiSoft)

Chicken Shoot

Blow away the chickens in this henhouse of a shoot-em up. A mindless shooter, it promises to deliver over 25,000 chicken animations. (ZUXXEZ Entertainment)

Going Tet à Tet

Take the long road from Dien Bien Phu in Vietcong

by Cindy Yans

Recently, the Czech Republic has been no slouch in producing some rather compelling products. Cases in point: 7FX's *Team Factor*, Illusion Softworks' *Mafia*, and Bohemia Interactive's *Operation Flashpoint*. In its latest endeavor, Illusion Softworks, in association with Pterdon, is wading into the burgeoning pool of games based on the conflict in Vietnam with its first-person shooter *Vietcong*, a squad-based action-shooter that places you in the role of a U.S. Special Forces commander in the lush jungles of Vietnam.

Although it is like *Commandos* in that you work with a group of six characters, each squad member has its own AI. You can interact with each of them, but you only actually control the main character, Steve R. Hawkins. The characters follow your basic orders (like Follow, Flank, Lay Back, etc.), but have their own personalities that control how they fight and otherwise react to stressful situations.

The initial goal of most missions is to contact your home base, which you will do via your radioman, P.J. Defort, who also assists you in calling in air strikes, and requesting evacuation. The home base will usually issue you orders that elucidate the rest of the mission goals. Then it's up to you to work with the rest of the guys: C.J. Hornster, machine gunner/fighter; J. Crocker, medic, who will provide your team with healing during and after each mission; T. Bronson, engineer a.k.a. "ammo pit;" and Le Duy Nhut, pointman. This pointman character will be key to your assessment of upcoming conflict, as you will most often send him ahead of your group for recon purposes.

Vietcong will ship with more than 20 missions, several multiplayer modes in which you can play U.S. or Vietnamese forces, and a number of weapons including the M60 machine gun, M16 assault rifle, Soviet AK-47, PPSh-43, and more. The designers actually travelled through Vietnam as part of their research, and the games beautiful environments are verdant and very realistic. Snipe it in the first quarter of 2003. ●

(top) You will often be deposited into a new setting via helicopter. >>> The NPCs have very distinctive personalities.

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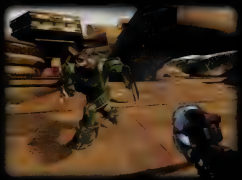

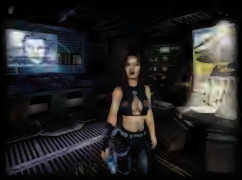

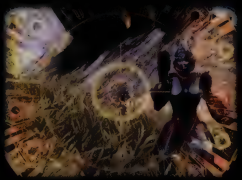

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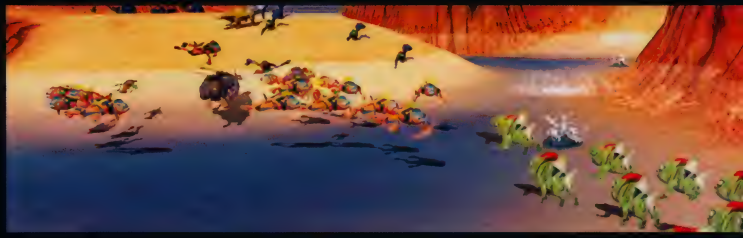
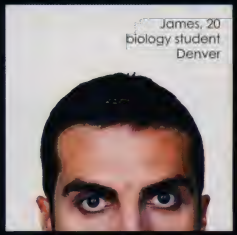




James, 20
biology student
Denver

Jessica (716-410) let's face it. The only good Pirawolf is a dead Pirawolf.

You need to have balance. A good air combat squadron of Vulturesharks, plus a battalion of Hyenadragons, and finally, Turtlelions for the amphibious fights. "Snakes and snails with scorpion tails." These are what real men are made of.

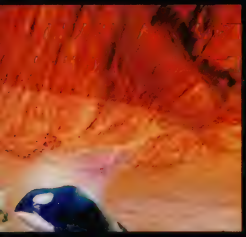
Tommy, 23
computer programmer
San Francisco

Violence
Comic Mischief

Microsoft game studios

relic

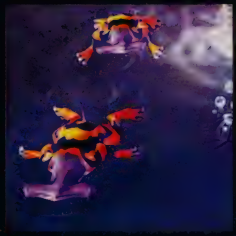
BY AN ARMY OF PIRAWOLVES WOLF).... WHAT WILL YOU DO?



[redacted]: send in my goons. Eagorillas and Rhinobulls.

These boys will punish anything. If the French had them, they wouldn't have needed us in WWII.

END OF STORY, BIZATCH!

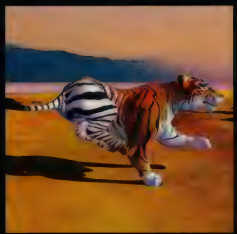


[redacted] let's just say,

MAJOR PAIN IN THE...;)

A Tigebra is pretty wicked, or a Tiganzee. Haven't tried a tiger and a rhino yet.

My bet is it terminates with extreme prejudice. I like that.



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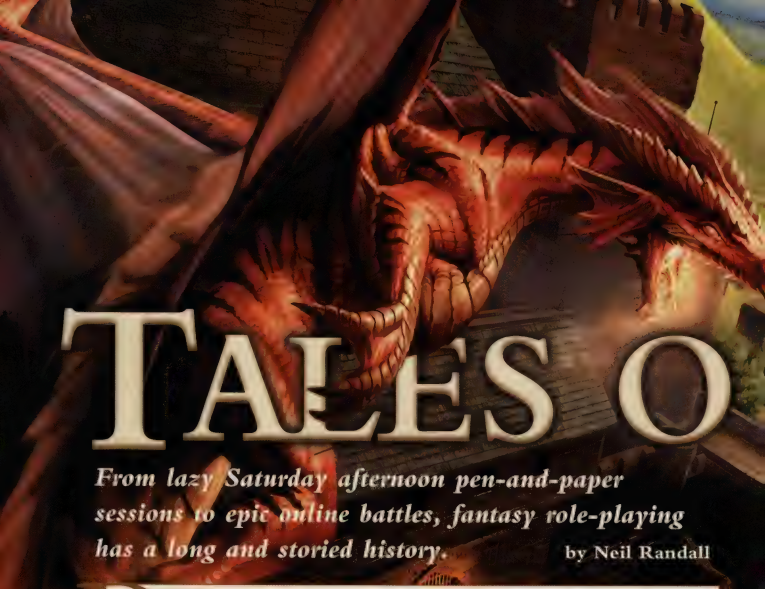

TALES O

From lazy Saturday afternoon pen-and-paper sessions to epic online battles, fantasy role-playing has a long and storied history.

by Neil Randall

Picture this. It's Saturday afternoon, and you're getting together with some friends to play a game. But when you get to the agreed-upon location, there isn't a computer or videogame console in sight. In fact, you haven't even heard of a thing called a videogame, and the only computer company you know about is IBM. In the near future you will hear of a weird tennis-like game called *Pong*, which gets played on your TV screen, and about something called an Apple, which apparently lets you play wargames on the computer. But not yet, because it's only 1974.

Usually during these Saturday get-togethers, the group either splits into pairs to play historical board games like Avalon Hill's *PanzerBlitz*, or you all gather at the board for the game *Diplomacy*, a cutthroat power politics game from Games Research. But today, you've been told to be in the mood for something new. Seems that someone has put out a game based on fantasy novels such as J.R.R. Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* and the good old swords and sorcery genre, and the guy whose house you invade every Saturday wants you all to give it a try. Fair enough.

"It's new," he says as he hands you a piece of paper and a pencil. "It's from a small company called Tactical Studies Rules." You've heard of them, but barely; they had released a game named *Chainmail* that featured medieval combat with such beasties as trolls and ogres. "They call it *Dungeons & Dragons*." Quickly you discover that the pencil and paper is all you're getting—oh, and some dice. There's no board and no playing pieces. Instead, they tell you that you play a single character in a fantasy story, and all you do is listen to what your host is telling you and react according to how you think your character would react, rolling the dice as the "rules" required.

Six hours (or more) and dozens of battles, magical spells, and dice rolls later, you've played your first role-playing adventure. In fact, you've played the very first role-playing game on the market, and the one destined, in its *Advanced Dungeons & Dragons* form, to be one of the most successful games ever. And the one that will spawn endless copycat competitors and, later still, an entire genre of computer games. Welcome to fantasy role-playing.

Illustration courtesy of BioWare

From Eldritch Wizardry to Just Plain Wizardry

Dungeons & Dragons was a game idea rather than a game, and the publishers, whose name was soon abbreviated to TSR, decided to release support material to help people play. Guides to monsters and weapons soon appeared, as did adventure modules, of which the now-legendary *Greyhawk* and *Eldritch Wizardry* were among the first. Even so, the game was so complex and so open-ended that hoards of competitors soon found their way on to the market. The names alone are evocative: *Tunnels & Trolls*, *Chivalry & Sorcery*, *Empire of the Petal Throne*, *Traveler*, *RuneQuest*, *DragonQuest*, *Pendragon*. There was even a highly successful and long-lasting game called *The Generic Universal Role-Playing System* (GURPS). The new hobby even generated bad press when, in 1979, a deeply troubled university student's disappearance was associated—wrongly, it turned out—with his interest in *D&D*, and the resulting media hype laid the foundations, in many ways, for criticisms of game-playing that have followed the videogame industry ever since.

One of the problems with the role-playing hobby was that it was difficult to get five to six people together in the same room for several hours on a regular basis, a timeframe that an RPG campaign demanded. By this time, playing games against a computer had already become an alternative activity, with the rise of the Atari and Intellivision videogame machines in the late 1970s. Now came the Apple II, the first personal computer that was bought, by at least some of its purchasers, for the sake of playing games. The wargaming hobby was immediately and forever changed by this machine, and role-playing games followed suit very shortly.

The reason was *Wizardry*. Released in 1981 by Sir-Tech this game was the first *D&D*-like computer role-playing game ever. The original *Wizardry* (subtitled *Proving Grounds of the Mad Overlord*) placed you in a dungeon setting where you could readily find treasure, weapons, and of course, monsters. As in pencil-and-paper RPGs, your characters gained experience as they adventured, and rose in ability levels as their experience grew. It also pioneered the 3D first-person viewpoint, with walls on each side and the corridor straight ahead, which until not too long ago was a standard. Today the game's graphics wouldn't pass anyone's test of acceptability, and sound was at best negligible, but this product established the fantasy RPG as we know it today. *Wizardry II* hit the stands the following year, and *Wizardry III* in 1983, each taking longer to play than the last.

Actually, *Wizardry* wasn't the first RPG for the Apple II. That honor went to a small and not especially interesting game called *Akalabeth*, released in 1979 by California Pacific Computer. *Akalabeth*'s major importance lay in the fact that it introduced computer gamers to designer Richard Garriott, who went on to create the *Ultima* series of games under the nom de plume Lord British. Garriott re-wrote and expanded *Akalabeth* and released it as *Ultima* in 1981, then added greatly to the Ultima world in the immensely popular *Ultima II: The Return of the Enchantress* in 1982, and even more in the superb *Ultima III: Exodus* in 1983 (from Garriott's new company, Origin Systems). Garriott and Origin continued the Ultima games up to number *IX*, and in 1997 founded *Ultima Online*, the first of what have now become known as massively multiplayer online role-playing games.

One of the chief differences between the *Wizardry* and *Ultima* game systems was the player's perspective. In *Wizardry*, for the most part at least, the player looked straight ahead, while *Ultima* primarily offered an overhead view. These two views differentiate games to this day, although an angled overhead view in roughly three-quarter perspective has largely replaced the direct overhead view,

allowing a sense of three-dimensionality. Many games of the 1980s conformed to *Wizardry*'s first-person viewpoint. Among the most popular were Electronic Arts' *The Bard's Tale* series, which began in 1986, and SSI's *Advanced Dungeons & Dragons* series that opened with *Pool of Radiance* in 1988. By the end of the 1980s, however, the overhead view had become increasingly popular, with one of the early successes being 1988's *Faery Tale Adventure*, released for the Commodore Amiga by Microillusions. This game, although never breaking into mainstream sales, influenced the hobby by offering the kind of enormous game world we now take for granted.

From Just Wizardry to Thousands of Dwarves Abreast

In fact, the rise of the massively multiplayer game gives RPGs a new beginning, one that draws from the past and allows some impressive visions of the future. The greatness of pen-and-paper RPGs lay in the interplay among players as they made their way through the Game Master's storyline. Computer RPGs lost that interplay, of course, and the stories were rarely as engrossing. One exception is 2002's single- and multiplayer *Neverwinter Nights*, which so far has come closest to replicating the tabletop *D&D* experience. As online role-playing games develop, however, watch for worlds rich in multimedia to be overlaid with strong and complex stories in which player interaction is paramount. In fact, the players, by playing the roles of their characters according to those worlds, will be able to build stories and even cultures on the fly, by virtue of their actions. For example, this "player-reactive environment" is key to the design of *Asheron's Call 2* and *Shadowbane*.

This is something that single-player and most multiplayer RPGs were never able to do because the story and world were fixed, and pencil-and-paper games couldn't do because there weren't enough players and only one (often beleaguered) Game Master. But today, high-speed networks becoming the norm for gamers, and MMGs are working out the bugs to the point where they are fast becoming social gaming events beyond both traditional RPGs and even the online multi-user dimension (MUD) games of the early 1990s. Here, developers can quite possibly bring even Tolkien's Middle-Earth to a game environment—faithfully. We are now in a position to witness a truly dramatic reshaping of what it means to play fantasy games.

And that, precisely, is what *Dungeons & Dragons* did almost three full decades ago.

Neil Randall role-plays as an English professor in his day job. He has taught Tolkien and numerous other fantasy and science fiction authors in many classes over the past fifteen years, and has appeared on television in Canada several times discussing Tolkien and fantasy.

This was never my choice.
THE NOTUM WARS
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SPLITTING HOBBIT HAIRS

Two experts go head-to-head about the scope of Tolkien's influence on role-playing

by Neil Randall & Daniel Greenberg

Neil Randall: Almost every history of fantasy role-playing that I have seen claims that the hobby was based on the writings of J. R. R. Tolkien, whose *The Lord of the Rings* single-handedly catapulted the fantasy book market into the mainstream. Indeed, the creators of *Dungeons & Dragons*, Gary Gygax and Dave Arneson, cited Tolkien as a major reason they developed *D&D* in the first place. The book's enormous popularity during the 1960s, combined with the wargaming hobby that emerged in the 1970s, led naturally to the hybrid form of fantasy wargaming.

But if the role-playing hobby took its cue from Tolkien, it clearly didn't understand what Tolkien wrote—at least, not the core of the great trilogy. Yes, Hobbits—later Halflings—appeared in virtually all RPGs as a class of character. So did Dwarves, Elves, Orcs, and Wizards, at least in one form or another. There were quests, and magical weapons and artifacts, and great evil to vanquish. But magic in Tolkien is highly unspecific: we never really see it, it certainly bears no resemblance to RPG magic. Also in the book, there's no such thing as a treasure hunt; in fact, the idea of a monetary system appears only at the very beginning of the trilogy, and even then only in a very minor way.

To be sure, Tolkien's *The Hobbit* most definitely has a treasure hunt, and there's an argument to be made that RPGs are based much more on it than on *Lord of the Rings*. *The Hobbit* gives us treasure for its own sake, a quest to get rid of a dragon, some almost random adventures, and things that appear out of the blue, making it much closer to the standard RPG. More importantly, though, the trilogy simply isn't about the same things RPGs are about: spells, battles, finding artifacts, and gaining experience are all remotely secondary to the great themes of sacrifice, choice, and friendship.

In only one area can Tolkien's work be absolutely confirmed as built into the role-playing hobby. Until the release of the movies, experiencing Tolkien meant using your imagination. Every reader had a unique idea of what Hobbits, Ents, Orcs, Dwarves, and Elves looked like, and there are as many individual interpretations of locations such as Lothlorien, Rivendell, Minas Tirith, and even The Shire as there are individual readers of the books. In a similar way, pencil-and-paper RPGs worked exclusively with the richness of the player's imagination. If the person running the game—the Dungeon Master in *D&D* parlance—could evocatively describe the invented world and the adventures taking place within it, the players' imaginations would provide all the immersion necessary.

That, in fact, was the dominant charm of these games: imagination ruled. But using the imagination did not follow role-playing into the computer market, in part because everything is laid out to the player in graphics-rich screens that obviate the imagination the way increasingly realistic special effects do in movies. Visual images do not necessarily work against the imagination, but the more realistic and precise they are, the greater the chance that they will. The simple fact is that unseen is more terrifying than the seen—at the other end of the spectrum, the unseen is also more beautiful and desirable. Tolkien

himself knew full well the power of not seeing; nowhere in *The Lord of the Rings* books do we see Sauron, the great figure of evil, and another great mythic evil, the Balrog, is given little more in the way of explanation. By not describing, we are forced to imagine, and that's where fear comes from.

To say that RPGs are based on *The Lord of the Rings* is like saying that the Monkees were based on the Beatles. Technically it's true—four mop-tops making bouncy pop songs with high harmonies, and cavorting around in silly videos—but from an artistic standpoint, the point was largely missed. RPGs recreate some of the technical details of Tolkien, but the technical details aren't what make *The Lord of the Rings* a great work of art. Those details are certainly part of its greatness, but the whole work rises far above them. No role-playing game, whether the pencil-and-paper or the computer kind, has its basis in attempting to simulate art.

Daniel Greenberg: First of all, the Monkees are based on the Beatles. And *Dungeons & Dragons* is based on *The Lord of the Rings*. But drawing a comparison between the creation of the two is what misses the point.

The Monkees' handlers skillfully packaged the Beatles' external image, but lacked the skill (or interest) to capture the Beatles' depth or essence. They understood the hair, but not the heart.

Similarly, the co-creators of *Dungeons and Dragons* bundled up many of the external elements found in Tolkien's works. Elves, Dwarves, Hobbits, and Humans. Wizards, Fighters, Thieves, and Rangers. Orcs, Wraiths, Trolls, and Balrogs. (To say nothing of dungeons. Or dragons.) And similar to the infamous Monkee-marketers, they were not especially successful at extracting the remarkable depth of Tolkien's work. But give them credit—precious few fantasy writers have come anywhere close, either.

So, are fantasy RPG players the moral equivalent of Monkees fans? No. To avoid becoming "Daydream Believers," should role players hang up their dice (and mice)? Hell no. Here's where the analogy falls apart:

First of all, *D&D* is not a formulaic fantasy novel that imitates Tolkien enough to sell but not enough to be sued. It's a role-playing game. It's an entirely new medium, and its co-creators deserve credit for launching an amazing new avenue of expression and creativity.

On the surface, *Dungeons and Dragons* may wear trappings "borrowed" from Middle-earth, but its heart is not empty. Tolkien's passion for building and sharing worlds is the creative fire that burns at the core of all RPGs, even computer ones.

RPGs democratize fantasy, spreading the power of world creation to us all. (As Tolkien famously said, "fantasy remains a human right.") Now we don't need to be philologists capable of translating Beowulf to become mythmakers and world-builders.

Videogames like *Neverwinter Nights* repeat this trick. They steal the divine fire of world-creation from computer game pros and deliver it into the hands of even those with a jaded, MTV attention span.

Secondly, many role-players enjoy an added dimension not available to consumers of pop music. Monkees fans cannot improve on the product given them. *D&D* fans around the world can and do. "Role-playing" was not truly integrated into the first edition of *D&D*. It was independently discovered and simultaneously pioneered by *D&D* players around the world.

In a freak vindication of the Hundred Monkey Theory, legions of *D&D* players simultaneously began to focus less on hit dice and treasure factors, and put more energy into their shared stories. The inner life of

Illustrations by Justin Sweet

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their characters became more significant than their levels, and the themes explored in the game became as rich and nuanced as many found in books—Tolkien's included.

I know, because I was there—one of the kids who grew up with *D&D* and helped *D&D* grow up. As fans began to turn pro, RPGs began to explicitly explore storytelling, character-development, and thematic exploration. I wrote for a number of these evolving RPGs, like *Vampire: The Masquerade*, and saw how much more the fans could do when the games supported their desire to play imaginative roles.

Fans of role-playing will always enjoy a rousing dungeon stomp. But many are hungry for more nutritional content in their gaming, just as fantasy readers are want more books with Tolkien's depth. The only difference is that gamers are armed and ready to create it themselves when it's in short supply from the pros. Though the big online massively multi-player games support role-playing the way they support monster-killing and leveling, you can still find plenty of people building rich characters and developing intriguing stories.

"Legions of great artists still have not succeeded in reducing Tolkien to a single interpretation, and a film won't succeed either, no matter how special the effects—which will seem tired inside of a decade, anyway."

Middle-earth has plenty of magic. Not the promiscuous magic-inflation of *Dungeons & Dragons*, perhaps, but magic intertwines everything in Middle-earth, as Galadriel will tell you. Often, magic is operating when you do not realize it. There are also plenty of overt spells, cast not just by Wizards, but by Dwarves, Elves, Men, Wraiths, Dark Lords, etc. (Everyone but Hobbits.) However, in order to tell a story about the little guy (literally) making a difference, the powerful magicians must be offstage most of the time. Some confuse this with a lack of magic in Middle-earth.

Middle-earth also has lots of treasure hunts. *The Hobbit* is all about a treasure hunt. To a dungeon-like fortress. To kill a dragon. *The Lord of the Rings* is a treasure hunt, too, only in reverse. And the heroes get more than dragon loot. They collect priceless treasures from trolls, undead, orcs, elves—even poor Gollum.

Monetary systems pop up from beginning to end. In the Shire, Bilbo's greedy relatives looking for his gold. In Bree, where Frodo is acutely conscious of his lack of money for the journey—like paying off rogues and buying new ponies. Lotho buys up property for Saruman. The fund for "hobbits made homeless by the troubles." If money does not become an issue in Mordor, well, they don't take American Express.

Tolkien downplays money because "food and cheer" are infinitely more valuable than "hoarded gold." It takes a backseat to enjoying song and dance and food and drink and pipes and fellowship.

Despite the existence of a movie, "experiencing Tolkien" can still involve using your imagination. Good books usually survive their popular onscreen translations, and great ones always do. Or can you not read the Bible without hearing Edward G. Robinson snarl in Brooklyn-ese, "Where's yer Moses now?"

Imagination does not happen in a vacuum, and graphics do not "obviate" it. In many cases, images spur the imagination, serving as a springboard to the often amorphous, inchoate images lurking the mind's eye. Studies show that imaginative children usually don't watch less TV than average. They watch more in their younger years and less in their teen years. TV images seen when young prove to be important fodder for a rich creative life.

Should kids not read either, for fear of putting thoughts in their heads when they should be thinking their own thoughts? That argument is as laughable as saying images stifle the visual imagination.

Further, I believe that Middle-earth will prove especially resistant to being pigeonholed by anyone's vision. The place feels especially magical because it's so plausible. It feels real, despite the magic and orcs and dragons and balrogs (which seem more amazing for the grounding in "reality"). This reality is part of what makes it feel so strangely familiar to so many of us.

Legions of great artists still have not succeeded in reducing Tolkien to a single interpretation, and a film won't succeed either, no matter how special the effects—which will seem tired inside of a decade, anyway. Just ask the average video-literate kid to show you where the CGI doesn't sync right or Frodo looks too big or the midgets look too obvious.

I had the good fortune of collaborating with *Dungeons & Dragons* co-creator, Dave Arneson, on a project to revitalize the very first fantasy RPG setting. The man who "ran the world's first dungeon" was surprised but pleased at the remarkable trajectory fantasy gaming had taken, and marveled at the amazing, deep, and even profound experiences that people were creating for themselves—using just his game, their imaginations, and the fertile ground of other sources of inspiration. I think even Tolkien would be pleased.

Daniel Greenberg is the Creative Director for the Tolkien Franchise at Vivendi Universal Games. He's a fan of "Daydream Believer" in the original, pre-Monkees version with one different word.

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THE MANY FACETS OF THE ONE RING

Vivendi has a plan for the future of The Lord of the Rings, covering all genres with multiple games in 2003 and beyond

by Cindy Yans

During its literary heyday, avid readers purchased about three million copies of J.R.R. Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* between the years of 1965 and 1968. If you add the many fans before that, and the countless since, you might accept the possibility that *The Lord of the Rings* might be one of the definitive literary creations of our age. True fans begin seeing The One Ring in their waking dreams like a circle of flames against closed eyelids shortly after they have absorbed the classic trilogy. Now how geeky is that? (Note that nowadays there is a certain fondness associated with the term "geek." After all, if you're reading this....) *Lord of the Rings*-related computer games began to spring up over twenty years ago, with dozens of MUDs, parodies, and Middle-earth rip-offs galore. When you look at some of the oldest, like *Shadowfax* for the Commodore 64 and VIC 20, to some of the weirdest, like *El Señor de los Anillos, Parte I: La Communidad del Anillo (Libro 1)* and *Lord of the Rings Mah Jongg*, you have to conclude that computer gamers have been, are, and will be dedicated to integrating Tolkien's world with their poison of choice.

The trouble is that getting a *Lord of the Rings* product from design document to your computer room has always been problematic. Three mid-eighties games from Beam Software did not fare well, and in the early nineties, Interplay's three titles, *Lord of the Rings, Volume One: The Fellowship of the Ring, Riders of Rohan*, and *Lord of the Rings, Volume Two: The Two Towers* were of varying quality. Sierra Studios sat on a *Middle-earth* game for the longest time, and finally, when Vivendi Universal acquired the lot of them, two conundrums emerged. The company needed to figure out not only how to best administer a vitamin shot to an existing-but-wheel-spinning *Fellowship of the Ring* title, but also what to do next with the valuable license rights granted to them by Tolkien Enterprises.

Surreal Picks up the Reins

Black Label Games, a studio of the games division of Vivendi, gave Surreal Software (creator of *Drakan* and its sequel) the task of bringing *Fellowship* to market with as little overhead as possible. Surreal came through with a PlayStation 2 and PC game. (See next page.) It's uncertain whether or not this quick turnover prompted Vivendi to turn its *Two Towers* game over to Surreal, but nonetheless, it's hard at work sculpting this title for release late in 2003. Similar to *Fellowship*'s Tolkien connection, it's based on the original book *The Two Towers*. Not to be confused with Electronic Arts' *Two Towers* game based on the first and second films, this storyline will follow the entire book, giving it a much broader scope as the story takes you through the Fellowship split at the River Anduin, Merry and Pippin's adventure in the Fangorn forest, and finally, to the climatic battle at Helm's Deep.

You will be able to play quite a few characters, including Frodo, Aragorn, Gandalf, Legolas, Gimli, Sam, Merry, and others, as you engage in many styles of combat. In melee, every character and enemy will have its own mechanics as well as special moves and combination attacks. Goblins, for example, can use deadly grappling-holds, while Uruk-hai Captains use battle horns to call reinforcements into battle. Since Hobbits are not known for their well-honed combat skills, their gameplay will involve a lot of stealth (hiding in shadows to avoid enemies) and a variety of adventure-esque puzzles.

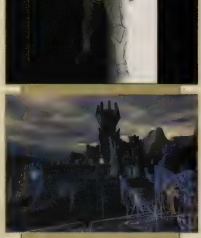
The game will also offer a new targeting system with a 360-degree attack span for certain characters, and you can switch between all playable characters at will.

Liquidity

Lord of the Rings invites you to try out the Dark Side as another game genre emerges. This iteration is a real-time strategy game they're calling *The War of the Rings*. Liquid Entertainment, which created *Battle Realms* and is headed up by Ed Del Castillo, the former producer of *Command & Conquer* and *Ultima: Ascension*, is developing the game. In the single-player campaigns, you'll be able to choose between the Free Peoples of Middle-earth and the Forces of Sauron (think Humans vs. Orcs, or GDI vs. Nod) in the single-player campaigns, with the Good campaign weighted a bit more toward heroes and individuals, while the Dark Campaign focuses on conquest, with entirely different storyline for each.

The Forces of Sauron tale is something of a new story that takes place before the events of

THE TWO TOWERS



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The Fellowship of the Ring. While it is faithfully based on the books, it is also a portion of the story that hasn't been explored much before. The Free Peoples' story involves the members of the Fellowship, but instead of just the same ring quest story, they are promising some surprises. "All and all, the story sets the stage for the founding of the Fellowship, says Black Label's Production Coordinator Jeff Nachbaur. "The focus here is more on the unit side of things...heroes will play a pretty prevalent role in the scheme of things." He mentions that it's still early, but general direction so far is more unit based and not tech tree driven like *Age of Empires*. "It will take place in the Third Age of Middle-earth, so a tech tree didn't really make much sense...."

Your units' strength and abilities will upgrade automatically via the experience you gain during the course of play. Each side will be able to cultivate Riders astride either Horses or Wargs, and each side will feature several different races. So if you want an army of one particular race, you can have it, or you can combine races for what may be more effective strategies.

Battle Realms is one slick-looking game, so *War of the Rings* has a lot to live up to. We can certainly expect a living 3D world with day and night cycles, and Liquid's gorgeous "spreading fire" effects. The game is due out during the second half of 2004, and if Liquid continues a similar focus, you'll see the heart of these sagas centered directly on the battlefield.

BORED OF THE RINGS

An overly simplistic and unpolished Fellowship of the Ring fails to impress

★★☆☆☆

Vivendi Universal's series of "Official Games Based on the Literary Works of J.R.R. Tolkien" (and not to be confused with Electronic Arts' series of "Official Games Based on the Film Versions of the Literary Works of J.R.R. Tolkien") stumbles out of the gate with *The Fellowship of the Ring*. Created by Surreal Software of *Drakan* fame, it stays loyal to the spirit, if not many of the specifics, of the source material. But unlike the books and the movie it's dull, with its general lack of polish giving it the appearance of a rush job.

Not that you'll notice right out of the gate, as it impresses with superior production values. A third-person action-adventure with a mostly free-moving mouse-look camera, it's superficially quite appealing, with colorful graphics—particularly at the start, in The Shire—superb music and sound, high-quality rendered cut scenes, and professional voice acting.

A mix of minor adventure game-style item gathering and a fair amount of combat, you switch between playing three different characters, Frodo, Aragorn, and Gandalf, traveling across the lands of Middle-earth on the quest to destroy the one ring with the usual suspects: Merry, Pippin, Sam, Gimli, Boromir, and Legolas. Major plot points play out in rendered cut scenes, while the engine handles the minor ones.

Exploring the Shire, running into Tom Bombadil, and exploring the mines of Moria is all well and good, and initially quite enjoyable, but the pacing is all over the map. When playing as Frodo, you run around on a few scavenger hunts, explore some tedious mazes, and either run away or fight many creatures. Aragorn and Gandalf are more action-oriented, but the combination of a camera that tends to wig out in any indoor environment—you literally lose sight if your character while clipping through walls or doors—and an overly simplistic combat scheme severely hampers the thrill of combat. It's basically button-mashing, with no subtlety or trick moves, and it quickly grows tiresome. If you're traveling with companions, you can usually run away and leave them to do the dirty work, since they apparently cannot die (just as bad guys can't fall over ledges). There are also a lot of minor issues—dubious AI, Galadriel's hair clipping through her chest on her character model, some missing architecture that lets you see through a wall, many invisible boundaries, lots of places for characters to get stuck—that add up to a major bummer.

Though far from being awful, this *Fellowship of the Ring* is merely uninspired, a mostly dull journey through a rich and wondrous world.

—*Steve Bauman*

Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring • *Vivendi Universal* • *ESRB Rating Teen*

◦ No digital trickery needed—Gandalf towers over his Hobbit friends. ◦ The production values are generally high... at least until you notice Galadriel's hair intersects her chest. ◦ Fans of Bombadil (you know who you are) who missed him in the movie can get your fill with the game. ◦ The mighty warrior Frodo attacks a spider with a stick.

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All Genres Covered

Vivendi plans two more games in the foreseeable future of this franchise. The first one is so far down the pike that they have not determined a developer at this point. A role-playing game called *Shadows of Mordor* is slated for release sometime in 2005. Rather than recreate any portion of the ring trilogy, it will offer a unique story based in the Middle-earth universe. They're calling it a multiplayer game with gameplay that seems like a mixture of *Diablo* and *Neverwinter Nights*. You'll be able to choose from a number of different characters and will aid the Fellowship in its quest, or pursue side-quests as you see fit.

Finally, *Asheron's Call*'s own Turbine Entertainment is working on the genre that almost seems to be an old standby at this point—another massively multiplayer online game. *Middle-earth Online* sets itself during the Fellowship's conflict with Sauron, and will entail Men, Dwarves, Elves, and Hobbits working together in small and large groups, where they will explore the world, build homes, craft mithril swords, or just get drunk and sing. A large number of resources will enable you to create more powerful weapons and armors, and even food or decorative items. High-end crafters can create the most interesting items in the game.

You'll undergo the usual activity of creating and developing a character and choosing its specialties, but, as in *Asheron's Call 2*, nothing is ironclad. You'll be able to reevaluate your decisions as the game progresses. For short-term adventures you may have up to nine characters in your party or "Fellowship," and there will be Kinships (think "guilds"), and online marriage and adoption. Turbine's track record indicates that you can probably expect a solid product, but at this writing, it looks like there's nothing particularly new. But since this, too, is a 2004 product, don't count on finding out anytime soon.

So, Universal really is pouring a ton and a half of content and resources into Tolkien's mold. And if the extreme passion and fervor of *Lord of the Rings* devotees who only want to "get it exactly right" does not get in the way of talent, and above all, teamwork, the future looks as bright as, well, mithril. ◎

MIDDLE EARTH ONLINE

THE RISE OF GREYHAWK

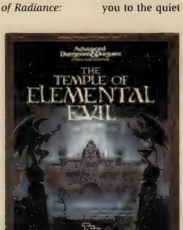
A long-neglected slice of D&D history surfaces, complete with Third Edition rules

by Cindy Yans

While Sirtech may have been the first to drag the dragon from the tabletop to the small screen in 1981, *Dungeons & Dragons* snobs turned up their collective nose at the product, because, after all, it wasn't "real" *D&D*. It didn't know the rules. To be fair, many players were probably thrilled to see any fantasy role-playing game that they could play during those wintry nights when Mom said, "No, you can't borrow the car to drive through 11 feet of snow for the weekly *D&D* session." A computerized version of their fantasy world of choice, however, didn't come to fruition until 1988 when SSI released *Pool of Radiance*, the first in a series of successful Gold Box Games using the Second Edition *AD&D* ruleset. When the Third Edition rules came to the PC, it was already 2001 as Ubi Soft Entertainment released *Pool of Radiance: Ruins of Myth Drannor*. This title was a disappointment to most folks who had built it up as the Second Coming, but it has since been patched to more than a modicum of respectability.

Baldur's Gate and its progeny explored areas of *AD&D*'s Sword Coast region that had been virtually ignored during the progression of the Gold Box Games, but there has been another *AD&D* staple that hasn't received a whole lot of attention beyond its table and dice origins. Beginning with the 1st Edition *AD&D Player's Handbook*, the *Greyhawk* world has been inextricably connected with the most basic *D&D* environments. Some of its NPCs, such as Bigby, Tenser, and Mordenkainen, were associated with specific spells, and likewise, Keoghtom, Kwalish, and Murlynd lent their names to various items and artifacts. Even the basic monster lists were based on the creatures of Oerth featured in *D&D* creator Gary Gygax's *Greyhawk* adventures. But where has this world been during the proliferation of *D&D*-based computer games during the last 20 years? Buried.

Finally, for release in the latter half of 2003, Infogrames will offer *The Temple of Elemental Evil*, based on Gygax's 1985 adventure of the same name. The original introduced you to the quiet village of Hommlet, the filthy shire of Nulb, and the ruins of the Temple of Elemental Evil beneath which lay a warren of eternal darkness. Troika, the creators of Arcanum and whose principles helped birth the post-nuclear world of Fallout, is developing this turn-based game that hopes to faithfully employ the *D&D* Third Edition ruleset. Multiple solutions to quests will lead different parties through different paths as they travel through the ruins of the Zuggtmoy-created shrine in which dark power has been lurking for centures. ◎



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TECHNICALITIES

winter blues

I wouldn't be in this mess if I had spent more earlier

Due to the magical nature of the magazine business, it's just about to turn November as I write this. That means up here in scenic Vermont (state motto: "Check out our maple syrup and gay marriages") it's already been winter for two months, and will continue to be winter for at least six more months. At least, that's what it feels like for me. I was born and raised in the south of Florida (state motto: "Duck!"), where it was a frigid day if the mercury dropped below 60°. We ran our air conditioning in February. All of February. I was 18 before I owned a pair of gloves. Also, daylight savings time recently ended, which means that it gets dark up here at about 4:00pm and stays that way until 10:00 the next morning. What I'm trying to say is, I spend altogether too much time in front of my computer and TV as it is, but during the eight months of Vermont winter, I just don't go out at all. I'm even starting to investigate grocery delivery.

That's not a problem, because winter is when all the cool gaming stuff comes out. Half of the year's big games are released right around now, and the other half are delayed until next spring "to polish and tweak it more and make sure it's the best game it can be" (at which point it will inevitably be released as a buggy unpolished mess). But these great new games chug a little bit on my home system. When I bought it back in 2000, it was hotter than Britney Spears. A 1GHz Athlon with a huge 256MB of SDRAM! Now I've thrown in more RAM, but when I try to run the latest games, there's no doubt that my home PC has become skankier than Christina Aguilera.

My TV is starting to suck, too. I've got the brightness cranked all the way up and half my channels are still too dark, with too much red in them. The picture is better with video games, but not by much. I paid like $250 for a floor model four years ago, so I guess I got what I paid for.

Since my only sources of stimulation during my cave-dwelling winter months are on the way out faster than Kid Rock's career, and I'm too strapped to replace them, I got to thinking about what it costs to keep up with this stuff. And more importantly, what people can do to make sure they have the best possible gaming experience for as long as possible. I have a simple rule of thumb I use for buying my own equipment that has served me well: If it's something you can reuse for years, spend more to get better equipment at the start. Let's take monitors as an example. I bought a Viewsonic V95 19" monitor when they were pretty new, and while it's no longer top of the line, it's lasted through three computers. My Grado headphones will be with me for years, and I often prefer them even with access to a nice 5.1 speaker setup.

I should have listened to myself about the TV. If I'd had only spent $200 more on something a little less generic, it probably would hold me for another year or two until prices on high-definition TVs inevitably fall. Now, I'm probably going to have to replace it, and then do so again in two years when hi-def is the thing to have. There was a slightly better motherboard available when I bought my computer, and had I spent more on that (plus some pricey DDR RAM), I could slap in a cheap Athlon XP 1800+ now and be good to go.

Where can you cut corners? Get a good motherboard that's ready for some future unreleased processors, then buy a cheaper CPU. In a year, you can easily upgrade without throwing out your CPU and RAM. Video cards move so fast it's hard to justify big bucks for some extra speed, so I recommend sticking to the $200 models. There are exceptions: a card like the Radeon 9700 isn't just fast, it' has all the DX9 features future games will use, so while it costs twice as much, it'll probably last you twice as long.

> "My only sources of stimulation are on the way out faster than Kid Rock's career..."

Before you hole up for the winter, basking in the warm irradiating glow of your cancer-inducing monitor, think about whether or not your equipment is up to the task. Then ask yourself, "what are the long-term buys that I should splurge on?" Playing the upgrade game is a lot less painful when half of your stuff is good enough to hang on to. ●

TIP OF THE MONTH

Windows XP for A to Z —Just about everything you could ever want to know about Windows XP can be found at Kelly's XP Korner (www.kellys-korner-xp.com), from Activation to Zip Folders and every error message, control panel, and context-sensitive menu in between. It's a fantastic resource.

Q Hey. I was planning on building a dual Athlon system and I had a few questions. What is the best motherboard to buy for a dual Athlon set-up? What is the difference between the Athlon XP and the Athlon MP? Does Windows 2000 professional support dual-processors?

Sakura 608

A For most games you won't see much in the way of performance improvement by running dual processors, and in fact you'll probably get more speed with a single Athlon XP in one of the newer, more advanced motherboards like an nForce2 or VIA KT400. There are other reasons to run a dual-processor setup, of course, so let's run through those questions real quick.

There is no one "best" motherboard, but I've had good luck with ASUS in the past. Their dual Athlon board is the A7M266-D. AMD has a list of recommended motherboards on their website in the Technical Resources section.

The Athlon MP is basically the same as the XP, only it's certified for use in multiprocessor systems. It's generally rated as more tolerant of heat and said to have better uptime under heavy use, as is often the case in server situations.

Yes, Windows 2000 Pro supports dual processors, as does Windows XP Pro (but not Home). I'd go with XP if you don't already have 2000 and need to buy a new OS anyway.

Q Which is better: 512MB of PC 1066 RAM or 2GB of PC 800 RAM? What is the best Soundcard, the SoundBlaster Audigy Platinum? What is the most compatible with games, Windows XP Pro or Home ? Which would be better, NVIDIA's NV30 or ATI Radeon 9700 and which one will still be good in the future ?

Ali K.

A Right now, not many games make good use of more than 512MB of RAM, so I would personally go with the faster RAM, if your motherboard supports it, and add more later if need be. If you regularly use your computer for memory-intensive tasks other than games, go with the larger amount of slower RAM.

The best sound card is sort of subjective, but I'm impressed with the new Audigy2 Platinum. The Turtle Beach Santa Cruz and the built-in audio on NVIDIA's nForce motherboards are both good choices, too.

Both the Home and Pro versions of Windows XP are identical as far as game compatibility goes. They even use the same drivers for your hardware.

Finally, until the NVIDIA's next-gen card (NV30) is released, it's hard to say if it'll outclass the Radeon 9700 Pro. I would bet that it would, as it's being released a few months after ATI's card and uses a smaller manufacturing process, which may allow for higher clock speeds. We'll have much more on NV30 in the very near future.

Q I have a 1.5GHz Pentium 4 machine with a Hercules GeForce 2 Ultra video card. I'm planning on upgrading the video card and was wondering how the workstation cards compare to the consumer cards, ATI Fire GL vs. ATI Radeon and NVIDIA GeForce4 vs. NVIDIA Quadro4. (I don't think I'm a gaming addict, but I'm willing to sell my first born to make sure I've got the best video card.)

Craig E.

A Those professional workstation cards basically do some stuff like individual line anti-aliasing and have special driver certification that only matters for workstation graphics programs like Maya, 3DS Max, or AutoCAD. They're not any faster than the regular consumer models, and in some cases are actually slower. Plus, they're definitely a lot more expensive. For the best gaming video card, stick to the consumer stuff.

Q To run today's best hardware, what kind of power supply would you need? I was thinking about recycling the one I'm using now for when I build a new system.

Ted

A That really depends on how much hardware you cram in there. If you run four hard drives, two optical drives, and a bunch of other stuff, you'll need a lot of juice. Generally speaking, anything 350 watts or more will do just fine, and if you're not sure go for something 400 and up. It's not a bad idea to spend a few extra bucks on a model that's designed to run quiet, since the power supply is a big contributor to overall computer noise.

TECHBYTES

Dolby does PC—The THX logo has appeared on a variety of PC speakers for some time now, but Dolby has mostly stayed out of the consumer PC market. Now they've announced their new "Dolby in PC" initiative, aimed at bringing Dolby sound technologies (and the Dolby brand) to millions of casual computer users.

Chief among these is some new tech called Dolby Virtual Speaker. Details are still a little slim, with the company only claiming that it uses, "a next-generation advanced algorithm to reproduce the dynamics and surround sound effects of a precisely placed 5.1 channel speaker system on a PC equipped with just two speakers." That sounds a lot like the tech companies like Aureal brought to the PC with A3D, but Dolby's version would have to work a whole lot better to actually sound like true 5.1. Immediately, Virtual Speaker will be available in new versions of WinDVD and PowerDVD, but the company is working with DSP manufacturers to include the tech. Conceivably, any game you play can take advantage of 5.1 sound might be able to be "virtualized" in this manner in the future. Good news for those of you without the room for rear speakers, if it works.

Dolby's new PC push also includes the formerly unveiled Dolby Headphone technology, which is meant to do the exact same thing as Virtual Speaker, but with a pair of headphones. This is generally a lot easier to pull off, thanks to headphones' lack of crosstalk or room reflections and ability to block out exterior sounds. That far, there are only one or two products on the market that support Dolby Headphone, including a new Dell Inspiron notebook.

If these technologies work as advertised, Dolby's PC initiative can really mean a lot to the majority of gamers who don't have 5.1 sound systems but want a fully immersive sound experience from their games.

Computer Games EDITOR'S CHOICE

Turning Pro

The Sound Blaster Audigy 2 delivers pro-quality audio for consumers

by Jason Cross

MANUFACTURER Creative Labs (www.creative.com) **MSRP** $129/$199

Though it's plastered all over the box and advertisements, the original Audigy is not really a full 24-bit 96KHz sound card. Sure, it's digital output does the whole 24/96 thing, but everything gets downsampled to 16-bit 48KHz for processing, and then upsampled to 24/96 again to go out the digital connection. As a result, it's not really what you would call pro-quality audio. For its encore performance, Creative has taken the same EMU10K2 chip from the Audigy, souped it up a bit, and improved the analog-to-digital and digital-to-analog converters to deliver all the first one promised, and then some.

To start with, it now supports full 24-bit 96KHz sound in both recording and playback, with up to seven discreet audio channels. And if 96KHz isn't good enough for you, the Audigy2 can handle 24-bit 192KHz sound in stereo mode. It improves the already stellar signal-to-noise ratio of the original Audigy, so if you have the speakers for it, you can really crank it up and the sound stays clear.

Since games are only starting to use 44KHz sounds for some sound effects, you might wonder what all this high-fidelity stuff is good for. The answer is DVD-Audio. Not to be confused with the audio tracks on a normal DVD video disc, DVD-Audio is a new audio standard that can be read by the same drive mechanism (any modern DVD-ROM will work), but requires totally different software. DVD-Audio discs usually include 24/96 tracks in 5.1 audio—which takes some getting used to, but really makes music come alive—and often has 24/192 stereo tracks as well. Depending on the DVD-A disc you use, the improvement over a standard CD can be quite amazing. The Audigy2 is not the only sound card with the capabilities necessary to fully exploit DVD-A, but all the others are rather pricey models made for professional musicians and none of those come with the necessary playback software as Creative's latest does.

This is one sound card that truly delivers remarkable sound quality for all manner of music and movie playback, even sounding noticeably more "crisp" and distinct than the Audigy when playing standard audio CDs, but there's been some game work as well. It doubles the number of simultaneous 3D voices the card can accelerate from 32 to 64, and the CPU power used when doing so has dropped. Because it's based on the same chip, there may be updated drivers for the original Audigy to enable 64 3D-voice playback, but for now only the Audigy2 and nForce motherboard audio provide that capability. The slightly lower CPU utilization isn't anything to write home about, but it did buy a couple more frames per second in *Unreal Tournament 2003*.

It's nice to see Creative work on improving its software. The much friendlier MediaSource has replaced the PlayCenter application, and it's even simpler to disable the ever-annoying pop-up video when you boot up your machine. The best utility is the detailed yet easy to use speaker calibration tool, which should be a standard for future sound cards. Driver compatibility seems quite good (there were no glitches with any game tried) though the reputation of Creative in this area is less than stellar, and your mileage may vary.

If you already have a great sound card, upgrading to an Audigy2 is a questionable investment unless you have a real need for DVD-A playback or 24-bit recording. This is a card that demands good listening equipment, and without a nice set of speakers or headphones, you won't be able to fully appreciate it. As with other Sound Blaster cards, it comes in both a basic version, or a Platinum model with a front-mounted breakout box full of inputs and outputs and a better software bundle for about $70 more—an expensive proposition, but at least you get *Soldier of Fortune II* and *Hitman 2* as part of that price. If you're looking for the best-sounding consumer card on the market, look no further. ●

UPSIDE	Best audio quality we've heard, DVD-A support, good software
DOWNSIDE	Twice as expensive as most other sound cards
RATING	★★★★½

PLATOON

All the excitement of the big screen comes to your PC

The graphics in *Platoon* are nothing short of stunning.
- The Wargamer -

Platoon takes the gameplay popularized in Commandos to a slightly higher level in terms of graphics, squad sizes, and military capabilities.
- Gamespot -

Manage a platoon of up to 30 soldiers including medics, snipers, commandos, and engineers, each with their own personality and unique abilities.

First tactical strategy game to cover the Vietnam War from 1965 to 1968, recreating actual US Army missions.

The dynamic 3D terrain and weather effects accurately remodel the harsh Vietnamese conditions, affecting combat.

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TEEN T Violence

CONTENT RATED BY ESRB

Velocity Micro Gamer's Edge DX

RATING ★★★★☆

MANUFACTURER Velocity Micro [www.velocitymicro.com] MSRP $2470

The latest "Gamer's Edge" model is a case study in what to expect from boutique PC manufacturers. Inside you'll find a 2.8GHz Pentium 4 in an ASUS P4T 533-C motherboard, together with 512MB of PC1066 RDRAM. Cables are neatly tucked away and it's all rather neat and clean, a necessity when you've got a big glass window to show off the blue lighting inside (even the power supply has a blue light in it). Video duties are supplied by a Radeon 9700, but not running at stock speed. This particular system included a free basic overclocking package that cranks up the video card by 10%, but a more aggressive $35 option is available as well. A 120GB Western Digital hard drive with 8MB cache, TDK 48/16/48X CD-RW, and Toshiba 16/48X DVD-ROM round out a screaming bundle of hardcore PC hardware. A big binder holds all your manuals and invoices.

The case is pretty slick, if not for it's nice black and silver styling then for it's fantastic drive covers that create a uniform front face without messing with annoying swinging or sliding doors. A digital thermometer up front lets you watch your inside case temp, which in all our testing never got above 31.5° C (about 89° F), and adjust the speed of your case fans to make the tradeoff between cool and quiet. We just love the two USB ports located on the front edge of the right side along with the Sound Blaster Audigy's FireWire port, as well as a whopping six USB ports in the back, four of them USB 2.0.

With the Gamer's Edge system, you get what is becoming increasingly common among boutique PC manufacturers—a system of superior construction with extra frills like windowed cases, internal lighting, adjustable fans, and "from the factory" overclocking that runs like a bat out of hell, and costs like you'd expect it to. At over $2400 without monitor or speakers, this PC isn't a bad deal, but it's going to set you back a pretty penny. A Dell with similar hardware specs but without all the bells and whistles costs about $300 less. It's not spectacular, but it is a very nicely built system and a good deal for those looking for the perks typical of boutique PC dealers. —*Jason Cross*

Stereo Computing

RATING ★★★☆☆

MANUFACTURER Starfish Technologies [www.starfishtech.com] MSRP $1775

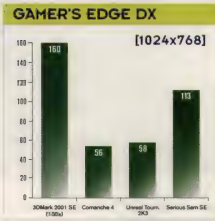
The thing you remember most about Starfish Technologies' SS2000 system isn't the company's incredibly bizarre sea-shanty name, but the slick Coolermaster case the computer comes in.

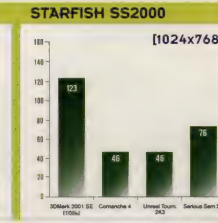
It's a nice shade of charcoal grey with a brushed aluminum front panel and a clear glass cover for two optical drives, giving it a look reminiscent of '90s stereo equipment. It's actually rather attractive, and looks good sitting on your desk, which is a good thing since it's also one of the only horizontally-situated PC cases we've seen in ages, so it's ill-situated for the floor under your desk.

The components are fairly standard: a 2.53GHz Pentium4 stuck in an ASUS P4B533 (the micro-ATX version) with 256MB of DDR RAM. DDR holds back the Pentium4's performance relative to Rambus, but it's also cheaper and this is still a high-performance system. Video duties are handled by the venerable GeForce4 Ti 4600, but the nice twist here is that Starfish uses MSI's retail version of the card, which includes both video output and input and comes bundled with some decent software, including *No One Lives Forever*, *Aquanox*, and *Sacrifice*. The 80GB Western Digital hard drive is one of the new models with 8MB of cache for extra zip, and both the slot-loading 16x Toshiba DVD-ROM and 52/24/52x Lite-On CD-RW drives are top-shelf kit.

It's hard not to love the four USB 2.0 ports in back, with two more in front, but the Firewire port on the font of the machine is actually a clumsy re-route of the one on the back of the Audigy sound card, with a cable running through the machine (it also takes up one of the PCI slots). An internal hook-up would be significantly better. The rest of the machine's construction looks good, but the lack of expandability afforded by the limits of the case and the micro-ATX motherboard is worrisome.

Performance is good for a DDR-based Pentium4, but with only 256MB of RAM, some new games get choppy at high detail settings when accessing the hard drive. You'd be better served with more down-to-earth optical drives and a boost in the memory department. It's also a little disappointing to see that the couple-hundred-dollar price premium common to boutique PC manufacturers is here, but some of the amenities are not, like custom restore discs or a binder to keep all the system settings, driver CDs, and manuals handy. —*JC*





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Age of Mythology

Ensemble takes on gods and monsters and Owllovers

by Tom Chick

Computer Games EDITOR'S CHOICE

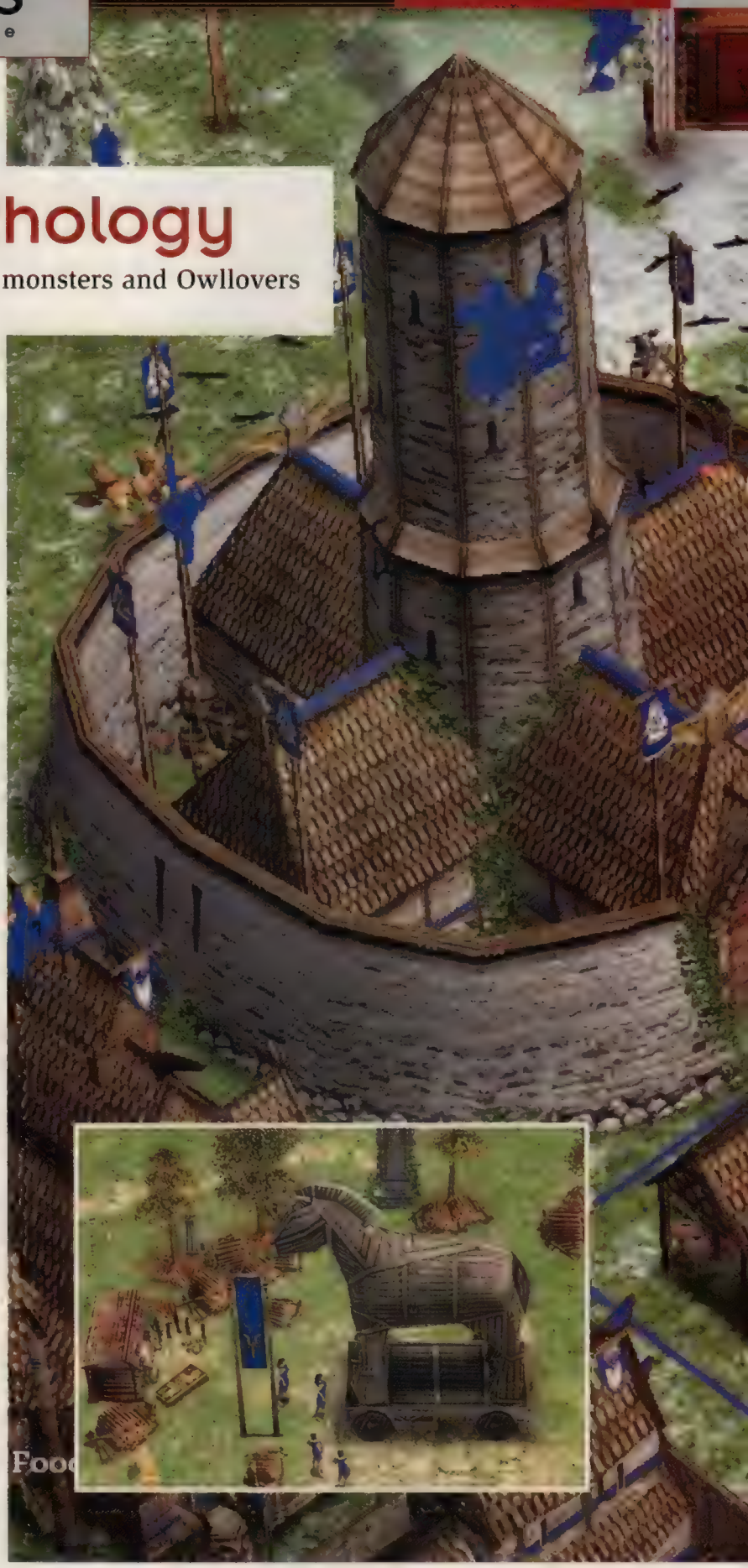
GENRE Real-time strategy DEVELOPER Ensemble Studios (www.ensemblestudios.com)
PUBLISHER Microsoft (www.microsoft.com)
REQUIREMENTS Pentium 450, 128MB RAM
MULTIPLAYER 2-12 Players; Internet, LAN
ESRB Teen

Ensemble fans beware! *Age of Mythology* is an "Age" game in name only. Ensemble's previous games had earnest historical backgrounds and a strict egalitarian balance like a downforce, squeezing out the variety. The sides varied mainly in increments. Korea was just like Turkey and Rome except for a 10% bonus in something like stone mining, a 5% penalty in something else, and maybe an obscure historical variation of light cavalry or something. By the time the system had passed through two games and two expansions, it felt carefully calculated, with all the inequalities sanded down and burnished to a dull gleam. It was measured out to brook only a little room for style and personality.

But you'd think Ensemble's Age of Mythology was created by a completely different group of people. Suddenly, each side has a broad and distinct style. There are fantastic creatures. Rules are bent and even occasionally mangled by exceptions. There are sudden reversals, with defeat snatched from the jaws of victory in the blink of a lightning bolt. There are powerups littered around the maps. Powerups! What is this, *Red Alert*? There are Norse heroes named Knute Griffonlicker, Olaf Owllover, Bard Umlauttamer, and Sigmund Refreshingbeveragedrinker. Here there be monkeys.

You got your Cyclops in my cavalry

Age of Mythology works partly because it's built on the traditional foundation of the *Age* series. You got your civilizations, barracks, stables, cavalry trumping archers trumping infantry trumping cavalry, town center, villagers, food, wood, gold, marketplaces, formations, build queues, research techs, blah blah blah. These have already been drilled into your head. But this time, Ensemble folds in fanciful mythical monsters and precious divine interventions.



Wonders of the ancient world. Despite moving to 3D, the game retains the detail of its 2D predecessors. >>> [inset] Do you think they'll suspect anything?

Extraordinary ★★★★★ Excellent ★★★★☆
Maybe ★★★☆☆ Mediocre ★★☆☆☆ Contemptible ★☆☆☆☆

The soldiers in *Age of Mythology* look like they just walked/rode in from *Age of Empires* and found themselves in a beautiful 3D engine with fancy effects and a bunch of monsters standing around. Unlike a game like *Sacrifice*, where nothing's weird because everything's weird, *Age of Mythology* is all about the juxtaposition. A pig is a pig, but a pig on a sofa is a sight. A minotaur in *WarCraft III* is no big deal, but one marching in formation with your hoplites and light cavalry, towering above them with his massive axe, offers a tickle of cognitive dissonance.

To highlight the fact that they're special, these monsters don't just look weird and have lots of hit points. They have unique monstrous powers. They freeze, burn, petrify, or throw their victims. They heal themselves or grow new heads. They breathe sandstorms or roar orange waves of damage. They effectively show off their superlative polygonal models and animation. They hiss or slither or undulate or stomp and generally do an excellent job of looking nasty and special, lording their funky demi-divinity over all the little mortal men. It doesn't matter whether crocodiles with frickin' laser beams attached to their heads, for instance, are really part of Egyptian mythology (apparently they are). They fit in by standing out and being so unusual.

These monsters are called myth units, a term that makes them seem less real but is indicative of their place in *Age of Mythology*. Myth units require a new resource, divine favor, that each of the three cultures earns in its own way. Myth units have their own place in a slightly expanded paper/rock/scissors paradigm by being countered with hero units, which are again distinct to each of the three cultures.

In one of the game's most brilliant strokes, you choose which myth units you're going to use as you play. Before a game begins, and again each time you advance to one of the game's ages, you pick a god to worship. The god you choose gives you a myth unit, a divine power, and a handful of technologies you can research. It's like building your own tech tree on the fly, making choices according to whim or strategy. There are constant forks in the road where you choose one god and throw over the other, along with all the toys that accompany them.

The god powers that come with your choices aren't as common as myth units, but they're just as dramatic. You can use each power only once (note to developers: force players to make interesting and meaningful decisions), so they're all rare and precious. And they're also cleverly engineered to bend the game without breaking it. These aren't simply thirty wonderful flavors of fireballs here. In the right place, at the right time, a god power—or especially a combination of them—can swing the balance of a game. Of course, there's always the temptation to use them spitefully, partly because these little tricks can feel like they're burning a hole in your pocket. *Age of Mythology* sees plenty of clustered divine interventions when players shoot their theological wads in miniature armageddons

of frost storms followed by forest fires, cursed armies turned into swine, and Norsemen standing around with flaming swords and no one left to kill.

Lunch hour apocalypse

Age of Mythology manages to pull off a couple of amazing feats of balance. The first has to do with it's immaculate pacing. This is particularly difficult in a real-time strategy game that has to strike a careful balance between too much and not enough happening. It's almost miraculous how well Ensemble does this in a game that only plays at one speed. The combats play out slowly enough that you can enjoy the animation and special abilities, and even retreat if things aren't going well. The balance between offensive power and defensive structures is also just right. Walls and towers aren't too weak to bother with (in fact, walls are finally inexpensive and convenient enough that they're a viable part of the early game), but neither are they so powerful they stunt the flow of a game and grind the action to a three-hour stalemate. A typical *Age of Mythology* game lasts less than an hour (the online average is currently 29 minutes). That's short, but not too short. It gives you time to bring out the big guns without any down time when you're waiting for a resources or hanging fire until you "age up." Initial food gathering can be busy, mainly because there are so many early options for feeding your people. Eventually, farms take over, livestock are fattened up, and you don't have to fiddle with it so much anymore.

This is where another feat of balance comes up. The unit AI is good enough that you can give broad orders without worrying about your men and monsters doing too many dumb things. In a page taken from *Kohan*, myth creatures' special powers are used automatically; you simply put them in your army and they do their thing. There are times when units in a battle target fairly harmless things instead of whatever ranged units are pounding on them. There are also some shortcut keys missing for important functions like guarding and patrolling. But overall, *Age of Mythology* has the kind of pace, AI, and interface that gives you enough to do without overwhelming you on one hand or excluding you on the other.

Ensemble's final feat of balance is between single player and multiplayer/skirmish games. There's a long and varied story mode here, featuring an obligatory romp through each of the three sides' lands, but with detours to hell and back. It doesn't have as compelling a narrative arc as *WarCraft III*, but there's enough smartly scripted activity to make it a worthwhile trip. Then there are all the multiplayer and skirmish games. Rather than simply choosing a bunch of settings, games are played at specific places, each with certain built-in characteristics for layout, victory conditions, and resource distribution. At first glance, this might seem restrictive, but it takes terrain that would otherwise be cosmetic and gives it some personality. The snowy maps play differently than the desert maps and not just because they're white instead of brown. Ensemble has made them all mean something.

As an online game, *Age of Mythology* is as seamless and friendly as *WarCraft III*, with full support for stat tracking and ratings if you're into that kind of thing. You can include computer opponents with your choice of AI style and difficulty. You can analyze your performance with the extensive debriefings and recorded games. It can be as serious or whimsical as you want. There's even an utterly silly Lightning mode that plays superfast and downplays resource gathering, which is just another sign that Ensemble has let its hair down and gone really wild. All this from the maker of *Age of Empires*? Our formerly stoic historians are offering whimsy, variety, charm, and personality. It's as if the uptight, efficient librarian whipped off her glasses and started dancing around the bookshelves. Ensemble is now a real-time strategy party girl.

[left] The Norse go hot tubbing. >>> [below] This way to Hell. Divine powers can speed travel by opening up these portals.

UPSIDE	A near miracle of pacing, variety, balance, personality, and charm
DOWNSIDE	Could use a few interface adjustments
RATING	★★★★½

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EVERYONE
E
Violence
CONTENT RATED BY ESRB

The garotte is quiet, efficient, and effective. Just hope nobody in the limo was watching!

Hitman 2: Silent Assassin

Just when I think I'm out, they pull me back in!

by Andrew S. Bub

Computer Games EDITOR'S CHOICE

GENRE Deadly Action DEVELOPER IO Interactive [www2.ioi.dk] PUBLISHER Eidos Interactive [www.eidos.com] REQUIREMENTS Pentium II 450, 128MB RAM MULTIPLAYER None ESRB Mature

The first *Hitman* burst on the scene with a great deal of style. With it's dark and amoral premise, science-fiction trappings, and impeccably set up cinematic touches, it seemed the perfect mix between stealth, action, and tactical planning. It fell short due to its brutal difficulty, a few control problems, and an unfortunate lack of in-mission saves.

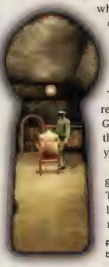
Hitman 2: Silent Assassin addresses most of these problems, and the result is a lot more satisfying. It finds 47, our bald anti-hero with the bar code on the back of his neck, quitting the business and hiding out at an Italian monastery, seeking redemption in the twin comforts of gardening and the confessional. However, like Michael Corleone in *Godfather Part III* he gets pulled back in when a local Mafioso kidnaps his friend and benefactor, the Priest. To get him back, 47 turns to his laptop and contacts his mysterious employer in a quest for information. That has a price, of course, and soon he returns to old life and murderous ways. What the hell, right? If he gets the priest back, he can always confess... again.

So, while waiting for the organization to put him firmly on the trail of the missing padre ole' 47 takes out Russian generals, mobsters, Yakuza, Punjab assassins, and more on a world spanning jaunt using a variety of weapons, tactics, and skills. The exhilarating missions—20 in all—involve infiltration and assassination, with escape thrown in as an afterthought. It's morally ambiguous and squirmy stuff, but, once again, you're only killing really bad people. Careful planning is important, but for the most part, the game allows you to simply run in guns blazing. Upon completion, you're graded on a scale that begins with Mass Murderer and ends with the titular Silent Assassin ranking. Naturally the goal is the art of not being seen, leaving a single corpse in your wake (the target), but at least this time out the mission doesn't end once your cover is blown.

The best way to go unnoticed is to walk or better still, sneak, both at mind-numbingly slow speed. Often, you'll have to knock unconscious or kill someone and wear his clothing—the game ignores niceties like pants and shoe sizes (47 is a big guy but one-size-fits all takes on new meaning in the *Hitman* world). At least this time out, 47 will be noticed if he's out of place. He can also be found out if he runs around a lot, or picks locks, looks through keyholes, or simply lingers too close to the bad guys for too long. They'll saunter over and raise the alarm. A "detection" bar helps clue you in when things get hot.

Most missions give you enough leeway to explore and execute your opponent in the most efficient way possible, while others are a bit puzzle-like, some illogically so, and that's really the game's only fault. Too often you'll execute the perfect plan only to be stymied by some puzzle-like feature. The frustration is alleviated by the new "save anywhere" policy, which proves at least that developer IO Interactive reads its reviews. As a concession, you only get seven saves per mission with a few more doled out as bonuses, and the game tracks how many times you saved, giving hardcore players the option to simply not use them.

The graphics are colorful and richly textured, making each new locale a treat for simple sightseeing. The game's physics engine is also impressive. Each character is animated like a puppet, and when struck and killed, each character dies vividly. It occasionally looks odd, but the "cool moments" outweigh any unintentional comedy.



Peeking through the keyhole. It helps know what's behind doors.

Above all, IO maintains a consistent and impressive atmosphere throughout, with good-to-excellent writing, voice acting, and sound effects. The video briefings are clever and useful, adding a realistic touch, and the enemy AI is top notch. Guards move in convincing patterns, targets flee if things get noisy, and guards group and advance on your position during a firefight.

When *Hitman* came out this sort of "play the bad guy" game was a new sort of controversial concept. Things have changed and the subject matter may no longer be as shocking, but at least this time there's no obvious flaws in this execution.

UPSIDE	Quality tactical stealth and action gaming, and you can save anywhere!
DOWNSIDE	The story is just an excuse to send baldy all over the world
RATING	★★★★½

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Combat Flight Simulator 3: Battle for Europe

Microsoft manages the Fuhrer of flight simulations

by Tom Chick

GENRE Combat Flight Simulator (duh)
DEVELOPER/ PUBLISHER Microsoft
[www.microsoft.com] REQUIREMENTS Pentium 500, 128MB RAM MULTIPLAYER 2-8 Players; Internet, LAN ESRB Everyone

[top] Who needs loose lips when you have 500lb. bombs? >>> [above] The wild gray yonder

Right around the third installment in a series, you start to expect a heap of sparkle, polish, and elegance. *Combat Flight Simulator 3*, sporting an all-new engine no longer based on the one from the venerable *Microsoft Flight Simulator*, feels like a first iteration that suddenly stumbled across its release date earlier than anticipated. It's liable to crash, lock up, or jerk around during a dogfight. In the quest for a decent framerate, you might end up with an ugly game, as if your 3D card was abruptly unplugged. Sure, the clouds look great and terrain at low levels is more convincing than it used to be, but neither feature is worth putting up with an engine this chuggy. All of this is particularly surprising considering the people behind this sim, which boasts new team members from Microprose's hugely ambitious and messy *Falcon 4.0* and Eagle Dynamics' ultra-polished and sterile *Su-27 Flanker*. Rather than complimenting each other, it's as if these creative talents canceled each other out.

Both Hitler and *Combat Flight Simulator 3* underestimated the importance of heavy bombers. Hitler thought he wouldn't need a heavy bomber and he lost the war. *Combat Flight Simulator 3's* fancy dynamic campaign is in a similar state of denial. You push a front back and forth across Europe by flying missions to shut down the enemy's infrastructure and production. In the actual war, this was something you would do in heavy bombers. But you won't see anything like that here. "B-17 Flying Fortresses?" the sim asks, "Never heard of them." Then it sends you merrily on your way to bomb a factory in the heart of Germany with a P-47 or a Typhoon. Even more ridiculous is the way it casts medium bombers as tactical support aircraft, dive bombing their targets and then zooming up and away like swallows.

This is probably about as much historical fidelity as you'd expect from a sim with a lenient flight model like this. Most of the challenge in flying these planes is presented by quirks like the weird autotrim override that nudges you around the sky as if your input were optional. Otherwise, you can hamfist your way through a dogfight without worrying overmuch about troublesome details like stalls and spins.

Even without heavy bombers, both Hitler's and *Combat Flight Simulator 3's* campaigns are ambitious. The game is doing something like *Longbow 2* or *Tornado*, where it extrapolates the progress of the war from your choice of missions and how well you fly them, but there are so many sloppy loose ends. There's not enough wingmen interaction to make them matter, much less make them helpful. Sometimes they don't even make sense. "That's one bandit down," your wingman cheerfully informs you after dropping his bomb on a barracks. If you fail a mission you can't fast forward home, giving each mission a "don't bother coming back unless you complete your objective" edict. There are role-playing elements that consist of pumping points, *Diablo*-style, into your pilot's vision, health, and G-force tolerance. It's an interesting idea, but it's just this side of blood pressure and cholesterol level in the spectrum of exciting stats.

Then there's the business of ordering ground assaults, a privilege you earn after you've flown just enough missions to get thoroughly confused about how the course of the war is determined. At this point, you can arbitrarily pick some place along the front for your country to squander all its supplies, but you might as well try to control a weather front. This campaign would have been a nice alternative to scripted missions if it weren't for all these curious design choices and shortcuts.

Hitler, being a dictator, didn't have very good multiplayer support. *Combat Flight Simulator 3* is slightly better in this regard, but only slightly. The lack of support for AI in dogfights, a bad padlock, and a half-assed view system make this a second-rate multiplayer flight sim. In the end, however, Hitler was an atrocity and *Combat Flight Simulator 3* is merely a disappointment. Oh well. There are always those IL-2s on the Eastern Front.

UPSIDE	Almost as erratic, funny, and ambitious as Adolph Hitler
DOWNSIDE	It's not in charge of its own country
RATING	★★☆☆☆

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Winning in the Coliseum on Solaris VII is a particular thrill. Die, Steiner dog! >>> (inset) Customize to your heart's content, even if BattleTech purists will have a heart attack.

MechWarrior 4: Mercenaries

Kill 'em all, let ComStar sort 'em out

by Robert Mayer

GENRE Mech Simulation DEVELOPER Cyberlore Studios [www.cyberlore.com PUBLISHER Microsoft [www.microsoft.com] REQUIREMENTS Pentium III 700 MHz, 128MB RAM MULTIPLAYER 2-16 Players; Internet, LAN ESRB Teen

Computer Games EDITOR'S CHOICE

Ever since Activision first brought BattleTech's ludicrous but strangely compelling vision of third millennium combat to the PC, fans of Jordan Weisman's neo-feudal game world have had a love-hate relationship with the results. The latest cycle of *MechWarrior* games from Microsoft's FASA Interactive unit have generally fallen on the amorous side of this equation, and *Mercenaries* continues that tradition. It sports the same divergences from canon that its predecessors do, but what it does it does with great refinement, polish, and success.

As in *Vengeance* and *Black Knight*, the previous *MechWarrior 4* games, you get a solid 3D engine, well thought out controls for your bipedal futuristic tanks, and excellent multiplayer. As developed by Cyberlore, which also did *Black Knight*, there are the now-standard compromises to balance gameplay: no instant-kill cockpit shots, no knocking off legs, and fully customizable BattleMechs. What's new is better mission design, less frustration, more 'Mechs, and more weapons. Most importantly, you also get a new wrapper for the combat that's at the heart of the game. Instead of following a linear series of missions, you get to pick and choose where you fight, and instead of dancing to someone else's tune, you call the shots. After all, it's your mercenary unit.

Mercenaries are a central theme in the BattleTech fiction; these units of planet-hopping freebooters are crucial to most of the decisive events in the game world's evolving storyline. In this game you command a small company of MechWarriors for hire, under the sponsorship of one of four famous mercenary units. Your starting stable of 'Mechs and MechWarriors depends to some extent on which merc unit you affiliate with, and each has its own bonuses, and after that, you're on your own. 'Mech chassis, weapons, and pilots all cost c-bills, and if you lose more money on lost machines and repair bills than you make on missions, well, you're probably better off with a desk job.

You select missions from those available on various worlds, as shown on your star map. Always available is the game world of Solaris VII, where you can work your way through the weight classes—light, medium, heavy, and assault—in gladiator-style matches for big prize money. It's a good way to boost your rating and your fame, and it's a lot of fun as well. "Real" missions, though, are rated for their difficulty, payoff, and faction. Rewards generally escalate with risk, and as you complete missions aligned with one of the game's two competing factions, your standing with them rises while it falls with the other. Usually, you'll reach a point where you have to choose between the two, triggering a different set of ending missions. Or you can try to avoid commitment, but it won't be easy—the galaxy simply isn't big enough for both Katrina Steiner and her enemies.

You won't be able to play all of the game's 40-odd missions first time through because of the faction limits, but that just gives you another reason to play again. The missions are well designed and exciting, though there are far fewer missions with repair facilities than veterans of the series might be used to. Then again, the number of 'Mechs you can choose from, even if you don't have the supported Clan and Inner Sphere 'Mech Packs installed, gives you a lot of choices. The popular Mech Lab allows you to mix and match weapons and chassis within rather broad limits, much more so than the classic board game, but there's a joy, too, in carefully crafting just the right combo to take on a particular task.

Cyberlore did a good job with *Black Knight* and they've done even better with *Mercenaries*. There's enough variety to satisfy all but the most jaded 'Mech fan, and the battlefield action is smooth and satisfying. There's so much more that could be done with this game world, both tactically and in the overall game wrapper, that you have to believe there will be more to come from Microsoft some day; the ending video suggests as much. For now, though, *Mercenaries* reigns as the king of computer BattleTech games.

UPSIDE	Excellent missions and multiplayer, tons of replay value
DOWNSIDE	Engine is aging, doesn't fully exploit the possibilities of the BattleTech property
RATING	★★★★½

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Arx Fatalis

Inspired by Ultima Underworld, but not quite worthy of its name

by Jason Cross

(left) Every cutscene looks just like this, with little animation and a slowly revolving camera. >>> (below) You'll make quick work of the goblins by the time you gain a few levels.

GENRE Role-playing Game DEVELOPER Arkane Studios [www.arcane-studios.com] PUBLISHER JoWooD [www.jowood.com] REQUIREMENTS Pentium 500, 64MB MULTIPLAYER None ESRB Mature

French development house Arkane Studios is obviously a fan of the former Looking Glass Studios, which influences almost every facet of *Arx Fatalis*. The upshot is that games like *Ultima Underworld* and *Thief* are landmarks of computer gaming, and worthy of imitation. The downside is that *Arx Fatalis* has exceedingly more problems.

In essence, this is a spiritual successor to the *Ultima Underworld* role-playing games. The sun has permanently set on the world, plunging it into eternal winter and forcing all the races underground. Now various factions of Humans, Goblins, and Trolls live in an elaborate interconnected dungeon, and they've all got their petty squabbles. Interacting with these societies is one of the highlights of the game, bringing back fond memories of similar underground fellowships in *Underworld*. It's hard not to chuckle at the enormous pride of the Goblins, who consider every other race stupid and smelly and constantly brag about how they're due for a promotion. The Trolls exhibit a good-natured naiveté and genuine stupidity that is both charming and a bit frightening when combined with their enormous size and earth-shaking gait. And the Humans…well… they're just your typical generic fantasy humans.

Some nice AI work and audio cues really bring the races to life. Taking a page from *Thief*, characters occasionally grumble and chat as they walk around, complaining about their worn boots or how they want to play cards, and they exhibit similarly smart combat reactions. They taunt you when the fight begins, but if you beat a goblin down too hard, he'll run off yelling "no kill me!" and calling for the big tough goblin Lords, who will dutifully come around to lodge an axe in your skull. The audio is excellent in general, with ambient sounds and moody atmospheric music that help create environments that feel real. The sounds of your own footfalls change depending on the armor you're wearing and your stealth skill. The *Thief* influence is obvious, right down to an "unlocking door" sound, which seems to come from the same original sound source (or is lifted directly from that game).

It's too bad it doesn't carry the personalities exhibited by the characters and enemies during gameplay through to the cutscenes and cinematics. When you have an important conversation, the game takes control out of your hands to present some terrible cutscenes. Every single one comes from that exciting "rotate the camera slowly around the speakers" school of cinematography, and there aren't any animations to lend body language to the script—everyone just sort of stands in place and blabs on and on about the plot. You've certainly heard the plot before anyway: an evil god is trying to invade the world and you're the only one who can stop it by destroying its evil cult, forging the Ultimate Weapon™, and eventually whooping its ass in a mano-a-mano showdown.

The overall game isn't much of a visual treat, but for every dull rock hallway there's a surprising spell effect or nifty temple architecture. Best of all, every environment has a palpable sense of place. The world just feels lived-in, and combined with good audio work, finely tuned player movement dynamics (except for awful jumping), and the unique ability to look down and see your legs and arms, you get a distinct feeling of being an actual person in a real environment instead of a camera floating through some level designer's eye-candy exercise.

Something about *Arx Fatalis* just feels like an old pair of shoes. It's comfortable and familiar, particularly to those that played *Ultima Underworld*, *Thief*, *System Shock*, or even *Black & White*, from which it lifts its glyph-tracing spell casting system. But for every warm fuzzy old-school feeling it invokes, there's an annoying old-school counterbalance, including a litany of bugs (some of which have been patched) and a tired, predictable plot. Individually these are all minor annoyances, but cumulatively they drag a potentially great game down to mediocrity.

UPSIDE	Reminds you of all the things you loved in old-school RPGs
DOWNSIDE	Reminds you of all the things you hated in old-school RPGs
RATING	★★★½☆

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Combat Mission: Barbarossa to Berlin

Blood on the snow (and the mud, and the steppes)

by Robert Mayer

A T-34/85 watches a Panzer burn in Budapest, late 1944. Note the driving snow.

GENRE Barbarossa to Berlin
DEVELOPER/PUBLISHER Battlefront.com [www.battlefront.com] REQUIREMENTS Pentium II 500, 64MB RAM
MULTIPLAYER 2 players; Internet, LAN, e-mail ESRB Not Rated

Like the original *Combat Mission: Beyond Overlord*, Battlefront's *Combat Mission: Barbarossa to Berlin* blends real-time execution with turn-based planning in a 3D, highly-detailed simulation of combined arms warfare. Moving the action to the Eastern Front, complete with Finns, Poles, Hungarians, Italian and Romanians as well as the requisite German and Soviet forces, it traces the evolution of combat from 1939 to 1945 in loving detail. The game's 60 battles and 10 operations or linked series of battles offer a satisfying sample of the war in the East, from infantry clashes in blinding blizzards to tank duels on the open steppes. And as before, you get both a versatile random battle generator and an extensive scenario editor to play around with.

Battles range in size from small firefights to epic struggles. The game functions best with small to medium sized encounters, though, as despite the numerous improvements in the interface and command system large battles still become something of a chore to manage. It's a lot better than it was in the original *Combat Mission*; with improvements like vehicle platoons and leaders and a revised unit labeling system, maintaining command and control requires much less of your time than before.

Barbarossa to Berlin's 3D engine is both its greatest strength and its only potential weakness. Compared to current 3D offerings, the game's visuals are a trifle rough around the edges, though vehicle models and most textures are as before generally superb. The 3D engine is getting a little long in the tooth in terms of its ability to simulate complex terrain. You won't find buildings of more than two levels, or true over and under passes, and the undulation of the landscape remains a bit on the angular side. None of these things detract seriously from the game, but they are noticeable.

But you won't be playing this one for its technical bells and whistles. The 3D view gives you an incredibly exciting and engrossing perspective on the tactical battle unfolding before your eyes, and forces you to think more like a real combat leader than most wargames ever have. And even with its flaws the game still looks impressive, sometimes amazingly so. With mod makers already churning out new terrain, unit, and building textures, you can expect to see a raft of enhancements available for download soon, along with more scenarios than you can shake a Panzerfaust at. And that's really where the game shines, in its ability to model virtually all aspects of the war between Germany and the USSR at the platoon and company level. From the human wave assaults of 1941 to the epic tank battles of 1943 and the desperate defense of Berlin in 1945, you get it all, and you get it in an accessible and well-crafted package.

The only substantive issues with the game lay in Battlefront's slowness to evolve the depiction of command and control, and the lack of a few rather desirable interface enhancements. While you do get a much improved vehicle command system, a better artillery model, and enhanced unit commands, there's still no true historical command structure and no way to conveniently survey the units you command. Their lack isn't all that serious, but again, after two years it's fair to expect just a tad more improvement on what was, when it was released, a cutting-edge game system.

Still, complaining about such things is like bemoaning the fact that your Dom Perignon came in a slightly dusty glass. This is the champagne of tactical wargames, and the best vintage at that. It's not a substitute for all other game systems, any more than champagne is a substitute for a good Beaujolais or a fine pilsner, but both *Combat Mission* games remain the most comprehensive and extensible tactical wargames ever made for the personal computer. The only real question is what Battlefront will do for an encore, and whether that too will take another two or three years.

Computer Games EDITOR'S CHOICE

UPSIDE	Vivid, encyclopedic tactical wargame with immense replay value
DOWNSIDE	Graphics engine lags behind state of the art, only a modest upgrade over the original game system
RATING	★★★★½

Lost Souls

RATING ★★★☆☆

GENRE Real-Time Strategy DEVELOPER Zuxxez Entertainment/Infinite-X PUBLISHER Strategy First REQUIREMENTS Pentium II 333, 64MB RAM MULTIPLAYER 2-14 Players; Internet, LAN ESRB Teen

The same three sides, the same tutorials, the same intro movie and the same damn game as *The Moon Project*. That's what makes up *Lost Souls*, the the third, and hopefully the last, in the heavily milked *Earth 2150* series of strategy games.

The new thirty-mission linked campaign follows the Eurasian Dynasty, Lunar Corporation and the United Civilized States as they once again attempt to maim each other on their way off of crumbling planet Earth. Unique units for each side are muted by similar weapons mounted upon them. The ED are severely underpowered leading to an exercise in hair pulling and teeth gnashing during their missions. The campaign doesn't take it easy on you either. Even on easy, by the fourth mission you will either be an expert or be looking up the cheat codes.

Superb visuals still impress despite their age. When powerful in-game armies clash, there is enough carnage to hold you over until our leaders get World War III rolling for real. In combat, you can employ everything from machine guns to nukes, and the explosions are still some of the prettiest you'll find in any game. Graphics are backed up by strong audio that, if it went to eleven, would blow you through the back of your den. Unfortunately, while the great music from the previous games

(above) Deadly, interlocking defenses win the day. >>> (lower left) The pyramids survive until at least 2150.

returns, there are no new tracks to enjoy.

Online play or AI skirmish will consume most of your time once the campaign wears out its welcome. EarthNet provides competition, but the game's German roots has you grabbing a Deutschland dictionary before trying to fight on the varied multiplayer maps. *Lost Souls* is the same fine game it was under another name, but fans can stay away unless they need the campaign and newcomers should pick up the budget priced *Moon Project* instead.
—David J. Long

Arthur's Quest: Battle for the Kingdom

RATING ★★★★★

GENRE $20 Waster DEVELOPER 3LV Games PUBLISHER ValuSoft REQUIREMENTS Pentium II 450, 128MB RAM MULTIPLAYER None ESRB Teen

Calling *Arthur's Quest* amateurish is an insult to all of the fine amateurs producing works of grand, non-ambitious mediocrity. As the title makes abundantly clear, you're Arthur and you're on a quest, one that involves bashing a few goofy looking creatures hundreds of times with a mace or a sword (you have arrows, but for some reason, they rarely hit even at point-blank range). Your adventure takes you across a land filled with vast expanses of flat terrain with walls made up of a tree-like textures and invisible boundaries that keep you from crossing rivers that look about a foot wide (your proportions to the environments makes you appear about 32-feet tall, so maybe it's all relative). The plot, such that it is, unfolds via cutscenes featuring random zooms and non-animated clones with no voices; micro-sized text tells you to go kill stuff, and at the end of the game, you kill the bad guy and it basically says, "Thanks for killing stuff. The end."

If you receive this as a gift from that aunt who really hates you, avoid playing the actual game and experiment a bit. Try progressing through entire levels without killing anything by avoiding all the bad guys and running toward the exit. You'll find, curiously enough, that the AI still runs during cutscenes, so all of those monsters you passed during the level will surround you when it's finished. It's also fun to try and trap the AI behind various rocks, trees, etc., or find the spots on the level where you get stuck. Or you can drive co-workers or family members batty by cranking up the audio and listening to the same dozen sound effects and the official "chant" MIDI music repeated for its entire four or so hours of play.

You could also gouge out your eyes, stick sharp objects in your ears, and break your wrists, and if that sounds like a fun way to spend your average Sunday, maybe this is the game for you. *—Steve Bauman*

This is one of those cases where a bit less texture detail would be welcome. Has this guy heard of waxing? >>> Watch out for the mighty pixie wielding an enormous axe that's been affixed to her arm.

Earth & Beyond

Dorks in Spaaaaaaace!

by Adam Fleet

GENRE Massively Multiplayer Spaced-Out Role-playing DEVELOPER Westwood Studios [www.westwood.com] PUBLISHER Electronic Arts [www.ea.com] REQUIREMENTS Pentium III 500, 128MB RAM, Internet Connection MULTIPLAYER Massively; Internet ESRB Teen

Massively multiplayer online role-playing games seem to disappear from the public's consciousness faster than you can say "catastrophically buggy release." While the market is saturated with medieval fantasy settings, the sci-fi scene has only a slow trickle, making it the right time for *Earth & Beyond* to take control of the stars, at least before the Lucas empire strikes back.

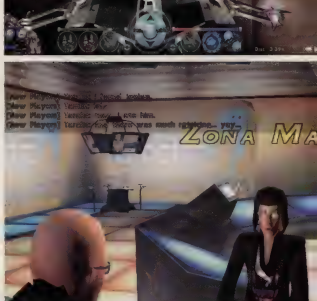
Earth & Beyond doesn't take place in a galaxy far, far away. It takes place right here in our very own corner of the universe. Humanity has split up into three "races" and warred for a couple hundred years, but it's all super groovy now. Tensions still exist, but there's a greater threat—a strange alien presence that is as mysterious as it is unnerving. Rifts in space called maelstrom have appeared, through which strange unknown ships come and go, exploring, as if searching for something.

This is where you come in, warping into this space odyssey as a new recruit. Each race has its own philosophy style: the Progen are a genetically engineered warrior brood, the opportunistic Terrans wheel and deal, and the scholarly and aloof Jenquai favor science to the ways of their brutish cousins. Characters gain experience in three different categories—combat, experience, and trade—and gain levels independently in each. Each level gets you points to use increasing your skills, with each of the six classes getting a different combination to play with. Everyone has their own little unique tricks, encouraging players to group together for maximum effect.

All in all, the system works well enough. Fighting is largely a matter of skills and equipment rather than twitchy reflexes, but things can get hairy enough at times that quick thinking and fast fingers can be the difference between a successful attack and needing a tow back to the nearest space station. Taking a relatively friendly approach to "death," there is not danger of loss of equipment of need for "corpse retrieval." Some of your equipment may be damaged in attacks, and getting a tow back to base will burden you with an experience debt, meaning you'll only actually gain half experience towards your advancement for a while, the other half going to paying off your debt. You can also cancel debt by logging off for a while to perhaps spend time playing another character.

In a day where disastrous launches and patches, patches, and more patches are the norm, *Earth & Beyond* managed a quietly well put together debut with a minimum of muss and fuss. The question now is, "Where does it go from here?" What's missing at this point is content, content, and more content. Beyond the training missions, there is little to do except for repeating basic operations to go up levels. Run a trade route, kill some monsters, explore a sector, rinse and repeat. Space stations have mission generators, but there is very little variety. NPC's who give higher ranking characters missions exist, but the rewards are often too small to warrant doing them except for the thrill of doing something new. There is also no player-versus-player combat at all right now, which might not bother some people but nonetheless feels like an element that is missing from the equation.

Earth & Beyond has a lot going for it in its fledgling state, but what Westwood and EA do to support it and nurture it will quickly decide its fate. The framework is there for a solid game with a compelling, if not entirely original, story. But without injections of more content soon it just doesn't have the oomph to justify the monthly subscription fee. Without help, another galaxy may soon appear to affirm that, "this is not the game you are looking for."



[top to bottom] You can land on some of the planets. This one is almost like home. Almost. >>> A Progen warship guns down the opposition. >>> Stations have NPCs for you to talk to, for shopping, getting missions, and just furthering the story.

UPSIDE	Solid environment for character advancement, pretty visuals
DOWNSIDE	Not enough content, lack of variety
RATING	★★★½☆

Farscape

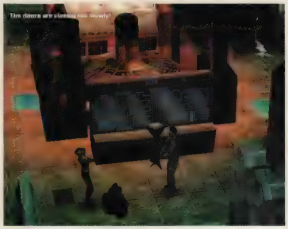
RATING ★★☆☆☆

GENRE Spaced out shooter DEVELOPER Red Lemon PUBLISHER Simon & Schuster REQUIREMENTS Pentium III 450, 64MB RAM MULTIPLAYER None ESRB Teen

When Simon and Schuster announced the game version of *Farscape*, the show's fans were thrilled. If you never saw the series, the designers still expect you to know quite a bit about this John Crichton man and this blue Chiana woman who crash-land on some planet, and also to know all about their organic spaceship Moya's pregnancy and peril. How, though? Exposition is minimal and sketchy at best.

This is a mission-centered, team-based combat game at heart, but you control only one character at a time, and assign a behavior to his or her followers. Sadly, the most interesting and best fighter-characters are unavailable until very late in the game. So, there you are, confused about the characters' relationships, and shooting everything in sight as you attempt to make your way toward the next goal—but don't worry—at all times there is an annoying purple arrow on an unwieldy automap that constantly points you toward that goal. This does get you to point B more quickly, which is what you're hoping for, as it doesn't take long to tire of the numbingly boring gameplay. The weapon set is marginally interesting: you get to wield and assign chemical, energy, or physical weapons, and it becomes important to know your enemies' weaknesses so that you will be able to mow them down appropriately.

The graphics are fuzzy and dated, and the locations are as uninspired as the level design. The interior of Moya is a let-down, as are the anticlimactic quest resolutions; the same is true of the top-down perspective that never zooms out far enough and the cheesy cutscenes designed to draw you into the mostly lame plot. What will please *Farscape* viewers the most is the game's voice acting by cast members Ben Browder, Claudia Black and others, whose dialogue is well-acted and solid. It's not enough though.



Is that a reactor behind the glass, or the Wheel of Fortune?

Red Lemon, creators of the sad excuse for a *Braveheart* game, seemed to have no feel for the soul of this gameworld either. Is name recognition enough? *Farscape* the series has been cancelled. The game was not. Nobody wins.

—Cindy Yans

US Special Forces: Team Factor

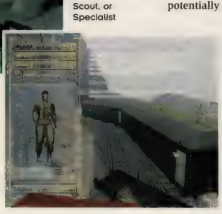
RATING ★★☆☆☆

GENRE Multiplayer First-person Shooter DEVELOPER 7FX PUBLISHER Xicat REQUIREMENTS Pentium II 400, 128MB RAM MULTIPLAYER 2-60 players; Internet, LAN ESRB Mature

If imitation is the sincerest form of flattery, then the makers of *US Special Forces: Team Factor* must be very sincere. But who can blame them? *Counter-Strike* is the big dog, and if you're going to "borrow" some ideas, you might as well borrow from the best. But there has to be something else, something to set you apart from all the other wanna-bes and would be usurpers of the crown. *Team Factor*'s answer: more teams. More is better than less, right? Maybe, but sincere or no, innovation does little for a game without solid execution, and that's where *Team Factor* proves that sometimes more is less.

Sticking to the tried and true formula, *Team Factor* is a team-based online shooter. Borrowing a little from column A and a little from column B, it's played in rounds but with a class-based character system rather than a straight weapon buying system. The big twist is that instead of two teams competing for victory, every round pits three teams against each other in mortal combat. Each side has a different objective, with victory conditions that are mutually exclusive and designed to discourage two teams from allying against the third. It's a novel idea, but one that doesn't go nearly far enough to making *Team Factor* a good play.

[left] "I dunno, boss. This here whirlybird just dun there fell from the sky!" >>> [below] Pick your poison: Soldier, Sniper, Scout, or Specialist



The biggest problems are simply in the game engine itself. It just isn't clean, and it takes a lot of starch out of any potentially interesting twists. Having over 50 realistically modeled weapons doesn't mean much if the performance doesn't change much from one to the next. Having a role-playing-esque attribute system under the hood is all well and good, but when movement is clunky and weird little glitches pop up everywhere it's hard to appreciate the nuances. Clever ideas don't make up for shoddy craftsmanship, and the only thing that *Team Factor* really needs more of is work. *–Adam Fleet*

Rollercoaster Tycoon 2

The game that spawned a thousand knock-offs is back, and not much has changed

by Jason Cross

GENRE Rollercoaster Tycoon DEVELOPER Chris Sawyer [www.chrissawyer.com] PUBLISHER Infogrames [www.infogrames.com] REQUIREMENTS Pentium II 300, 64MB MULTIPLAYER None ESRB Everyone

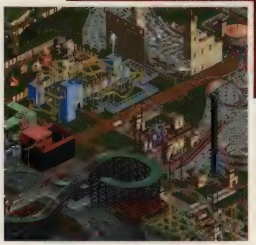
When is a sequel not a sequel? When it's a glorified expansion pack! Okay, so lumping *Rollercoaster Tycoon 2* in with *Corkscrew Follies* and *Loopy Landscapes* is probably an unfair comparison, but the additions and improvements in the sequel are of the magnitude found in most expansions and far beneath what's expected from a true sequel.

In many ways, Chris Sawyer's follow-up to his unmitigated 1999 hit finally gives fans what they've always wanted: separate coaster and scenario editors. The latter will surely provide a flood of home-grown scenarios online to extend the game's life, but with over 25 scenarios in total—including several Six Flags parks—you probably won't need more. In general, the scenarios are longer and harder than many of those found in previous games, and you now have the good fortune of accessing all them right from the start instead of winning scenarios to unlock others. Unfortunately, the oft-requested sandbox freeplay mode isn't present, though it wouldn't be too hard to fudge one with the editor.

The big marketing angle with this *RollerCoaster Tycoon* is real coasters and real parks. Through a licensing deal with Six Flags, you can now plop down existing designs for coasters like the Great American Scream Machine and take control of five real-world Six Flags amusement parks in a handful of scenarios. This is good news for coaster junkies, but it comes with an equal measure of bad news: because the game has no Warner Bros. license, some of Six Flag's most famous rides and attractions, like Superman The Escape (the tallest and fastest coaster out there), are missing.

The sequel's upgrades are numerous if not dramatic. There are more coasters, thrill rides, concessions, and decorative themes to uncover, some of which appeared in the add-ons to the first game, others that are wholly original. Rides can be taller than before, and a busy park now runs a little smoother thanks to some re-jiggering of the underlying game code. The maximum park size has increased as well, and while the previous size limitation wasn't much of a problem, some of those Six Flags parks are sprawling. Keeping everyone happy in such a huge environment without going bankrupt seriously tests your planning and management skills. Many of the dozens of pre-made coaster designs now come ready-made with optional theming, which is a great addition, but why doesn't the coaster editor allow you to make your own?

Ride designs now come with or without theming. >>> Code improvements make things runs smoother in a crowded park.



For all these tweaks, some of the things that really should have been addressed remain unchanged. The interface is the biggest sticking point. Three years ago, it was about as good as any other interface in similar titles, but others have made great strides since then, and Sawyer's game has only subtle tweaks. It's still too hard to manipulate terrain, clear obstructions, and click on tiny interface elements like the ridiculously small raise/lower price buttons. Most major "three years later" sequels have more substantial upgrades, particularly visual ones. It all basically looks the same as before, completely eschewing the higher-resolution, hi-color graphics and super up-close viewing modes all the tycoon rip-offs have advanced toward. The most egregious omission is the lack of any sort of time control, a basic function of all those other tycoon games that would make those long boring waits for a little more cash or for the scenario's end date to arrive a lot more tolerable.

So maybe Sawyer's sequel doesn't quite deliver sequel-worthy improvements in the graphics and interface department, but it's still the most detailed and elaborate simulation of its type, a game whose sheer scope makes it compelling even if it hasn't changed much over the years. If the lack of cosmetic and usability upgrades make it somewhat more aggravating than the original, the amount of new content and a few solid tweaks underscores the simple truth that it still manages to out-tycoon most of the competition with its astounding depth and attention to detail.

UPSIDE	Sort of like getting the original plus all the expansions rolled into one, nifty Six Flags rides, scenario and coaster editors
DOWNSIDE	Minor tech and graphics upgrades make it feel like an expansion rather than a sequel, not enough interface improvement, still no sandbox mode or time control
RATING	★★★★½

Grand Prix 4

RATING ★★★☆☆

GENRE Formula One Racing Simulation
DEVELOPER Simergy PUBLISHER Infogrames
REQUIREMENTS Pentium II 400, 64MB RAM
MULTIPLAYER 2-22 players; LAN, modem, serial
ESRB Everyone

Geoff Crammond seems to be stuck in second gear. The Formula One racing guru's *Grand Prix 4* looks and plays a lot more like a repackaging of the previous release in the series, with all of the strengths and all of the weaknesses back for another go. While it still boasts those uncannily astute computer drivers, it remains hampered by somewhat soft physics, outdated season information, and the absence of an online multiplayer mode.

Granted, those strengths can make playing *Grand Prix 4* a rewarding experience for fans of Formula One racing, especially those who missed the previous release. No competitor offers as much depth, or as much challenge. Racing your way through a FIA championship season is gruelling, thanks to smart computer drivers who know that pass isn't synonymous with pile-up. They display a perfect blend of aggression and caution, balancing the knowledge that risks have to be taken in order to win races against what seems to be a very real desire to preserve life and limb.

But these characteristics don't seem as impressive in 2002 as they were when *Grand Prix 3* hit shelves in 2000. For one thing, last summer's *F1 2002* more than matched Crammond's last release in terms of newbie ease of use and hotlapping. It also featured stunning graphics that set a new standard for racing games, one that *Grand Prix 4* doesn't approach even with its new animated pit crew and tremendous depiction of Monaco. Also, there are some sore points here that still need to be addressed. Physics remain too generic and forgiving. Cars and configurations should possess more individuality. Outdated FIA season information remains an annoyance. And an Internet multiplayer mode is still on the wish list.

Most of all, *Grand Prix 4* disappoints because the series hasn't really progressed. There is still no better simulation of competing in an F1 race against professional drivers, but the feel of the game has barely evolved since *Grand Prix 2* in 1996. At a time when Crammond should be in sixth gear, using his lengthy head start to lap the competition, he's dropped back into the pack. —*Brett Todd*

[left to right] Racing with Jacques Villeneuve in Montreal. >>> Monaco looks so good you could almost reach out and touch Prince Rainier.

Batman: Vengeance

RATING ★★☆☆☆

GENRE 3D Action/Platformer
DEVELOPER/PUBLISHER UbiSoft
REQUIREMENTS Pentium II 450, 128MB RAM
MULTIPLAYER None ESRB Everyone

It used to be that you could scour the shelves of PC games and see nary a comic-themed game in sight. Now, after the success of the *X-Men* and *Spider-Man* movies, you can't wave a pair of adamantium claws without knocking three half-baked efforts into the bargain bin.

For example, take Batman: Vengeance, the latest ill-considered port of a mediocre, reflex-driven 3D platformer from UbiSoft. As a launch title for the Xbox and Gamecube consoles, it was strictly average; considered against the excellent *Freedom Force* and *Spider-Man* titles, it's a sad clown in a fancy rubber suit.

From a strictly visual perspective, *Vengeance* is an excellent port, with high-resolution graphics of the sort you won't find with interlaced console output. Slower systems may see a little chop, but overall, it does a great job of capturing the look and animation of the '90s cartoon from which its aesthetic is derived. Voiceovers and sound are capable fare—if you're a Batfan, chances are the presentation will win you over. If not, there's the return of classic Batman villains such as The Joker and Mr. Freeze, blessedly sans Ah-nold's lugubrious presence from the last movie.

Where this game falls down is where it matters: the controls and camera. With a digital pad or keyboard, Batman is a bit of a tank. And with the camera selectively choosing to make sudden and unpredictable swings, Batman often finds himself a bat-splat on Gotham City's alleyscape. Items like the batarang require a slow and klunky shift to a first-person perspective, and can only be used in certain situations. Combat is strictly an Adam West affair, with the same canned combo tapped out *ad nauseum*. There's a few clever puzzles scattered throughout the levels; unfortunately, there's also a few incredibly painful flying and driving sequences as well.

Batman: Vengeance is only worthwhile for obsessive-compulsive Batfreaks and the thirty or so remaining kids who don't have a PlayStation 2. —*Douglas L. Erickson*

[left] Gotham City by night. >>> [above] Friedrich Nietzche, meet your worst fashion nightmare.

GENRE Action Role-playing, Super-sized
DEVELOPER Larian Studios [www.larian.com]
PUBLISHER CDV [www.cdv.de]
REQUIREMENTS Pentium II 400, 64MB RAM
MULTIPLAYER None **ESRB** Teen

Go ahead. Tell us this isn't Diablo.

Divine Divinity

Quality role-playing for those of mortal mortality

by Douglas L. Erickson

It's rather unfortunate that *Divine Divinity's* bizarre non-sequitur of a title and hideous cover art may consign it to an early demise on US store shelves, as it's one of the better role-playing titles released in a strong year for the genre. Wedding the monster-slaying, Monty Haul sensibilities of *Diablo* to the large, interactive world of an *Ultima* is a pretty obvious formula for success, and there's no doubt that developer Larian Studios roughly succeeds in doing so.

Originally titled "The Lady, The Mage, and The Knight," the game has apparent *Ultima* influences that Larian does not dispute, especially in the area of raw real estate. If you're looking to recapture the exploratory antics of the *Ultima* titles (pre-*Pagan*, at least) you'll find the absolutely massive, sprawling, contiguous landscape a big selling point. And although the manifold keeps, dungeons, and towns you encounter are rendered in a slightly dysfunctional perspective, there are so many of them—each laden with secrets and subquests—that you quickly forgive the odd graphic style.

This epic provides you with a choice of three basic character archetypes: the Survivor, a thief-type with various clandestine skills; the Warrior, specializing in weaponry and passive, battle-specific skills; and the Mage. The game provides both female and male avatars, complete with a variety of unique appearances. As you gain levels, you may select skills from any class, allowing you to mix-and-match as you see fit. On paper, this sounds like a great way to customize your character according to your play approach; in practice, the end result is almost always a mage/warrior hybrid. Each skill level requires a specific *player* level before you can increase it; again, this may prevent you from powering up one character skill to a fault, but it also creates a bias against later abilities, since a Level Five Meteor Strike is arguably a better buy than a Level Two Lightning Bolt.

There's simply no argument that the statistics, battle engine, and equipment are lifted wholesale from Blizzard's classic action titles: the stats (Strength, Agility, Constitution, and Intelligence) are roughly analogous to those in *Diablo*, and the equipment is not only treated in the same semi-random fashion, the display features an almost identical color-coding scheme. Is this bad? Absolutely not, as if you liked the click-crazy, hectic battles of *Diablo*, you'll adore the action-packed encounters in *Divine Divinity*. Larian has conveniently provided a "closest enemy" hotkey to assist the motor-challenged; press the Ctrl key while attacking, and you'll target the nearest monster. Potions and key items are also easily hotkeyed, and the interface allows for easy access to useful skills and spells.

If the scope of the terrain and the hordes of varied foes aren't enough, every single item, including plates and candles, can be picked up, and many have some sort of behavior when activated. This allows for some tricky puzzles during dungeon-delving; and while there's a fair bit of lever-pulling and key-hunting, there are also a number of areas that challenge you to combine or place items in order to progress.

If you're looking for the storyline of an *Ultima*, however, you'll be disappointed, as the story is 100% generic medieval hokiness, accompanied by terrible localization. There's a sort of campy, Piers Anthony-esque quasi-charm in the desperate attempts at humor that belabor the game's dialogue, but after the umpteenth time you encounter a deliberately fruity medieval stereotype (surly dwarves, foppish elves, dumb farmers, wacky villains), you'll be begging for *Diablo's* heavy-handed Gothic ambience. Fortunately, the inane ramblings of the plot present no obstacle to the cynical gamer, as it's best to simply "escape" the occasional cut-scene and resume playing.

If you're looking for a hefty slab of role-playing to help wile away the winter months, this title is definitely an ace choice. *Divine Divinity* defies its painfully redundant title and gives up some of the best medieval hack-and-slash to come along in quite awhile.

UPSIDE	A campy, quality hybrid of Diablo and Ultima VII, good interface, loot, loot, and more loot!
DOWNSIDE	Thoroughly uninspired plot, wacky localization, drab visuals
RATING	★★★★½

Incoming Forces

RATING ★★½☆☆

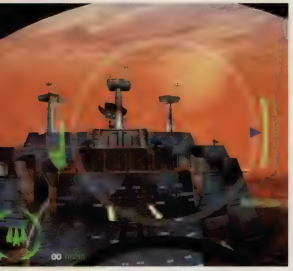
GENRE Arcade/Autist Shooting/Strategy Generica DEVELOPER Rage Software PUBLISHER Groove Games and Hip Interactive REQUIREMENTS Pentium II 266, 32 MB RAM MULTIPLAYER 2-8 players; Internet, LAN ESRB Teen

There are a number of eternal questions which can be addressed rhetorically, and which handily answer themselves, such as "Who am I?" "Why am I here?" and "Can computer gaming ever get me a date?" Add another to that list: "Did 1997's *Incoming*, a generic arcade blaster whose sole claim to notoriety is that you couldn't buy a cut-rate video card that didn't ship with it, really need a sequel?"

At twenty Earth dollars, it's hard to argue that *Incoming Forces* doesn't know its audience: casual gamers looking for a quick flurry of intense arcade action with only the vaguest of pretense toward the sort of strategic elements found in the vastly superior *Battlezone* titles. To its credit, each of the game's sixteen single-player levels is quite long and features varied objectives, and you'll need to effectively use each of the vehicle types (aircraft, tank, and turret) in order to survive the almost arbitrary spikes in difficulty. The tank controls need tweaking, too. But in an arcade title that requires precision shooting, is inertia really welcome?

The multiplayer mode fares better than single-player largely because it doesn't feature goofy alien talking heads and a ridiculously pointless story. The maps are well-sized, with plentiful power-ups, but even a decent team play mode can't overcome the pervasive sense of blandness that accompanies the tired 1996-era mechanics and style-free visuals.

"Incoming: The Sequel" is not without a few overall sparkling points: it's fast paced, has some high-quality pyrotechnics, and can become downright intense at times. This can also be said about virtually every shooter on the market right now, and even the more average entries feature better style and more interesting mechanics than this one. —*Douglas L. Erickson*



Impressive ground structures dot an otherwise featureless landscape.

Sniper: Path of Vengeance

RATING ★☆☆☆☆

GENRE Awful Game DEVELOPER Mirage Interactive PUBLISHER Xicat REQUIREMENTS Pentium III 600, 128MB RAM MULTIPLAYER Thank god, no ESRB Mature

If you're still trying to shake the lingering aftertaste left by *Mortyr*, a game that could crush your soul, you may want to avoid *Sniper: Path of Vengeance*. One of the posters you see repeated on the walls of various levels of Polish developer Mirage's latest masterpiece actually threatens a *Mortyr* sequel, which is enough to put the fear of god into a person.

Oddly enough, that news is slightly more upbeat than *Sniper* itself, which is awful, and not in a funny "look at this" kind of way. It doesn't just crush your soul; it zaps your will to live. When it's not crashing to the desktop between levels, it's merely a brutally ugly game (made with the same engine that powers *No One Lives Forever 2*, believe it or not) with non-existent AI, terrible level design, random swearing (at least when you can hear it; the sound levels are all over the map), and music that can be described as "unique." Or terrible. On the plus side, it does offer some interesting new gameplay tweaks, such as shooting a bus and causing it to bleed, and enemies that magically appear through doors before they open them.

Making things even weirder, the title lies. You take on a sniper mission at the very beginning of the game, and just as you're settling in for a *Hitman*-style mission-based shooter, you're thrown into jail, where you become the principle character in the world's first one-man prison riot. At this point, the game ceases to be *Sniper* and instead becomes that *Path of Vengeance* thing, a sort of dumbed-down *Soldier of Fortune*/*Max Payne*. You run around mowing people down with various weapons while restoring your health with drugs, alcohol, and "Cop Killa" corn flakes, which must be hysterically funny to someone in Poland.

Path of Vengeance is known, in shorthand, as *POV*. Change that V to an S and you have an appropriate description of the final game. —*Steve Bauman*

(top) When everyone dies, they go into this pose, even if there are walls around. >>> (above) This guy is oblivious to the fact I just shot his buddy with a shotgun.

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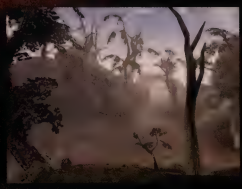

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Sudden Strike 2

More of the good war

by Brett Berger

[above] Reinforcements floating lazily to the ground are a beautiful sight. >>> [right] Mission briefings are reminiscent of The World At War series.

GENRE Real-Time Strategy DEVELOPER Fireglow PUBLISHER CDV [www.cdv.de] REQUIREMENTS Pentium II 333, 64MB RAM MULTIPLAYER 2-12 players; Internet, LAN ESRB Teen

It's 1942 and you're an allied colonel playing chess with the German high command for control of Europe. The war seems winnable, but at what cost? Your superiors have given you a rag-tag bunch of dogfaces to mount a complex operation against crack German troops. Your artillery is limited, air support questionable, and the Germans can outgun you in almost every category. The best you can hope for is local superiority in numbers, good intelligence and luck, lots of luck.

Sudden Strike 2 puts you in charge of combined forces during World War II. Though technically a real-time strategy game, it lacks many hallmarks of the genre, such as resource collection, building construction and unit creation. Instead, it excels in a recreation of tactical and strategic decision making in an historical setting.

There are an amazing variety of combat units including submachine gunning infantry, snipers, commandos, engineers, mortars, artillery, tanks, ships, airplanes, and landing craft. These units are not just clones of each other but in fact perform many unique and essential functions. The unit diversity is often complementary, and one of the great points of the game is its emphasis on combined arms. For example, some artillery can engage in indirect fire so the long-range view of the sniper unit makes it especially good as an artillery spotter.

The level of detail may seem daunting, but the fact that you are not building and gathering resources allows time for things like positioning artillery near spare ammo or for building a pontoon bridge to outflank the enemy. Though more realistic than most games of its type, *Sudden Strike 2* does use some abstractions to simplify play. For example, ammo boxes can reload any type of weapon or pilots that can fly any type of plane, but there would be a great loss of simplicity without cutting these corners and this allows focus to stay fixed on the more important actions in the game.

The well-designed missions require you to use cunning as well as overwhelming force. A single mission can require you to make a beach landing, free some POW pilots, capture an enemy airfield, and mount an airborne invasion. In campaigns, units can carry over from mission to mission, so conserving your forces and capturing enemy units will have a definite impact on the rest of the campaign.

If you're careful, you can use anti-tank rifle units to surgically remove enemy tank crews. Too much damage destroys the tank, but once you eliminate the crew, you can take control of it. Grabbing an extra tank or two is great fun and it can swing the balance of power in your direction on difficult missions.

Visually, it's not exactly state-of-the-art, with small sprites moving on a static background. Sometimes, units get lost behind buildings or other objects, and there is no easy way to find them other than to drag the mouse over a big area and see what you catch. There is also a lack of polish in the voice acting, poor unit pathfinding, and the lack of easy-to-use formations. However, all such issues have minimal effect on the overall game and should not be a deciding factor.

Sudden Strike 2 is to other real-time strategy games as *Thief* is to the first-person shooter, requiring less frantic mouse movement and much more careful thought. For example, tanks are invulnerable to small arms fire so human wave attacks against them are doomed to failure. You'll find yourself using more genuine infantry tactics like leap-frogging and making lines with point units out front. You'll need to use reconnaissance to find out where the enemy is setting ambushes while you set up your own. You'll soften up prepared positions with artillery before launching an amphibious assault. For those tired of frantic building in fantasy worlds, *Sudden Strike 2* serves up something pleasantly different and satisfying.

UPSIDE	Historical World War II setting, less task overload than other games of its type
DOWNSIDE	Lack of final polish, somewhat dated appearance
RATING	★★★★½

An early scenario challenges you to coordinate a siege.

Stronghold Crusader

In the desert, only the strong survive

by Douglas L. Erickson

GENRE Real-time Feudalism DEVELOPER Firefly Studios [www.firefly-worlds.com] PUBLISHER Gathering of Developers [www.godgames.com] REQUIREMENTS Pentium II 300, 64 MB RAM MULTIPLAYER 2-8 players; Internet, LAN ESRB Teen

If you're a medieval fetishist-cum-micromanager with plenty of faith, Firefly's sequel to last year's *Stronghold* may be the Holy Grail you're looking for. Loaded with more play modes than you can shake a tulwar at, this castle-centric take on one of history's more bloody period sports a great concept, but stumbles a bit out of the gate.

The early years of an erstwhile crusader are not easy ones, sadly. Despite the plentiful examples of intuitive interfaces the genre offers, Firefly has decided to go with a clunky tab-and-button affair that in some cases, defies any sense of logical ordering. Some of the most useful buildings, especially for the late game, are often several button clicks away, and why are towers and walls in separate menus? Hotkeys aren't advertised well, and with the limited option set, unit maneuvers can be downright migraine-inducing—trying to quickly pinpoint the source of serf anxiety is more taxing than a whole stack of 1040s. The major source of scalar feedback is the hideous visage of a rendered peon gazing luridly from the bottom-right corner of your screen: if he's smiling, people like you, and if he's you giving you a constipated grimace, things are Bad™.

In most situations, an interface this heathen would be a call to the gibbet, yet in defiance of its own heresies, *Stronghold Crusader* manages to provide a sort of triumph. Work through the tutorial a few times and spend a few (or many) hours in the easy-going Castle Builder mode, and eventually, you find yourself drawn into its little feudal world. Building a proper castle is not an art easily mastered, but once you see the effect of a well-designed fortress on your people (and your enemies), you find yourself contemplating castle development in your spare time.

That's a good thing, because it forces you to maintain a very fine balance between economics and warfare. Without happy citizens, you'll have no bodies to man your garrisons. But if you let 'em get too smug and fat, they won't show up for work and you'll be lacking the stone needed to repair your gates. The depth goes well beyond the smart placement of farms and quarries; you'll have to fine-tune your population's mood with a mixture of fountains and nooses until they're running at optimal efficiency. Tax or spend, coax or beat: every single decision you make will have an immediate effect on the growth of your castle. The elegantly reactive nature of the mechanics is micromanagement heaven.

Visually, Crusader manages to make your warrior edifices look mighty indeed; unfortunately, the overall art direction falls into the same moat as several other medieval offerings. Everything's all gray and brown, and there's very little to differentiate peons from warriors in the heat of the moment, especially at higher resolutions. That said, the castle sieges are truly staggering in their level of activity, and there's nary a hitch of slowdown.

Compensating for the lack of visual variety is the sheer wealth of interesting and engaging play modes packed into the CD. Besides a simple tutorial, there is also the Castle Building mode, a massive (50 missions) campaign that roughly follows the path of the Crusades, and a set of four historical campaigns that challenge the player to solve certain scenarios (including sieges and defending mountain strongholds) as either the European invaders or the Arab defenders. The AI in almost all cases is up to the challenge of punishing the infidel, and often simply watching your opponents' build orders in the early campaigns will be your best source of beginning strategy.

Once you work past the unnecessary hurdle of its cumbersome interface and lack of useful feedback, *Stronghold Crusader* is an amazingly deep title. Firefly has provided a uniquely compelling sequel, with an absolutely obscene amount of player options. Ultimately, much like the Crusades themselves, reaching the payoff requires expending lot of grinding effort. But once you understand the intricacies of a castellan's life, there's also a rich reward.

UPSIDE	A kingdom's worth of single-player content, challenging AI, absorbing gameplay
DOWNSIDE	Interface is sorely lacking, graphics painted in rich swathes of grey and beige
RATING	★★★½

NHL 2003

Enhanced AI or not, EA Sports' hockey game is a cementhead

by Brett Todd

GENRE Hockey Simulation DEVELOPER/PUBLISHER EA Sports [www.easports.com] REQUIREMENTS Pentium II 400, 64MB RAM MULTIPLAYER 2-12 players; Internet, LAN, Same Machine ESRB Everyone

In three important ways, *NHL 2003* is a better game than its predecessor. EA Sports has improved the offensive AI, tightened up the computer's defensive coverage, and added more realistic puck physics. It's now easier to set up scoring opportunities and get more authentic scoring chances, but harder to evade computer-controlled defenders and put the biscuit in the basket. In these key areas, the latest addition to the long-running hockey series is somewhat true to life, a comment that couldn't be said about its ancestors.

[left] Some camera angles make it seem like you're right in the rink. >>> [inset] Fights are still rock-em, sock-em robot-like affairs.

Mission accomplished, right?

Not exactly. While *NHL 2003* represents a solid stride forward in certain respects, it backpedals in so many other areas that in the end, the improvements are meaningless. Everything worthy of admiration is counterbalanced by at least two or three things that make you grit your teeth. It seems designed in a rush, with specific sore thumbs band-aided while others wait until next year. This approach makes the complete game reminiscent of a puzzle that hasn't been assembled correctly, with pieces jammed into place regardless of fit.

A case in point is the artificial intelligence. It has been bolstered so that your players react to each other on the rush, switching lanes to accommodate a forward moving out of position and covering for a defenseman moving deep into enemy territory. That's all well and good, but it's only half the game. In addition to reacting to one another, players also have to react to the puck, and they don't at all here. Players ignore, skate right past, and even actively move away from the black disc, as if it carries anthrax and the club doctor is fresh out of Cipro. By the time you take control of a player and get him into the play, the much swifter computer opposition has grabbed the puck and is halfway to your goal.

You get to recognize these offensive rushes by the computer team, too, because they all look the same. Even though your players mix up their approaches, your opponents do the same thing over and over again: A winger drives hard to the corner. He passes the puck into the slot just before you can reach him. An enemy forward gets away a one-timer on net. This tactic always results in a scoring chance because your defensemen invariably wander out of position and leave the goal wide open. Although these brain cramps are maddening on their own, they are particularly frustrating because the computer team's defenders are much more skilled. They often play positionally sound hockey and clear the front of the net with real gusto—so much gusto, in fact, that the computer is obviously cheating. When playing for the computer team, lightweight defensemen such as Tomas Kaberle and Tom Poti can manhandle power forwards like Joe Thornton and Eric Lindros. Switch things up, however, and a bruiser like Thornton can shrug off little guys like Kaberle and drive to the net unopposed.

Other aspects of the game reflect the split personality of the AI. Greatly improved puck physics cause the disc to rattle around in the crease and force goalies to make real saves, but the computer netminders are markedly better than yours even without the goal-line forcefield that benefited them in the past. Also, there is no way to redress this problem in season and tournament games, as the goalie and player boost sliders from non-exhibition tilts has inexplicably been removed. The user interface has been spruced up with an all-new system that replaces the console-centric screens of the past with pulldown menus and intelligently laid out stat screens that enhance season play. For the most part this belated acceptance of the mouse is a good thing, but there are a lot of omissions. For example, right clicking no longer pulls up a player's information screen, so you have to go to the team roster section whenever you need pertinent stats.

All of these problems make *NHL 2003* a disappointment. Although the enhancements are certainly welcome, spotty AI and blatant computer cheating make it impossible to appreciate the game as a whole.

UPSIDE	Some AI enhancements make play smarter in certain areas
DOWNSIDE	The rest of the game is as thick as a post
RATING	★★

The Partners

RATING ★★

GENRE Sims clone DEVELOPER Monte Cristo
PUBLISHER Strategy First REQUIREMENTS Pentium II 300, 64 MB RAM
MULTIPLAYER None ESRB Not rated

Much like *Ally McBeal*, which it attempts to channel in *Sims* form, *The Partners* is attractive to look at but difficult to spend time with. What made shows like *Ally McBeal* and *L.A. Law* popular was their use of the law as a foil to their prime time soap opera plot lines. All that sex, silliness, and bad behavior is amplified by having it all carried out by lawyers, whose profession otherwise demands dignity and seriousness. It's fun to see the high falutin' laid low like reg'lar folk.

The other part of the appeal of those TV shows, however, stems from use of the inherently dramatic structure of a trial as a crucible for contemporary social and legal issues. None of that is present in *The Partners*. Ranging from the absurd to the patently absurd, the lawsuits presented to your firm feel like they come straight from the Chance deck of *Monopoly*. Descriptions are brief, and none bears the slightest resemblance to a real-world issue. Though your interaction with a lawsuit is limited to assigning one of your sim-lawyers to "Work on Case," a more thoughtful approach to the content of cases would have added depth, context, and a "straightman" off of which to build humor.

You couldn't work real cases anyway. Curiously absent from your dollhouse accoutrements are law books. In fact, lots of things are missing. All told, you have but a few dozen objects and furniture pieces available for purchase. Moreover, given the disproportionate selection of exercise and leisure equipment, you can't help but wonder whether you're meant to run a law office or a 90s Internet company. To be sure, these silly items are fun to have around, but the law stuff shouldn't be neglected. Making out in a law conference room is inherently funnier than making out on a sofa. Not that your reviewer would know.
—*Robert de los Reyes, Esq.*

"It's like The Sims, only in a law firm! It'll be a smash!"

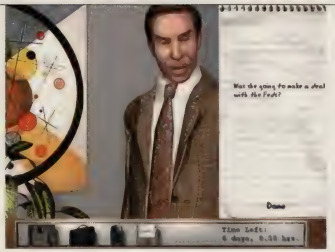
Law & Order: Dead on the Money

RATING ★★★

GENRE Adventure / Mystery
DEVELOPER/PUBLISHER Publisher Legacy Interactive REQUIREMENTS Pentium II 400, 96MB RAM MULTIPLAYER None ESRB Teen

In the gaming review system, gamers are represented by two equally important parties: the reviewer who plays the game and the magazine that publishes the review. This is their story.

As in the TV show, the story of *Law & Order: Dead on the Money* is ripped from the headlines. The stock exchange money machine of the 90s gives way to recession, and scandals emerge like rats from a sinking ship. In *Dead on the Money*, the market bust leads to more than mere scandal; it leads to murder. In a gaming universe dominated by fantasy, sci-fi and horror, this engaging (and well-acted) story offers a welcome change of pace.



It's the polygonal Jerry Orbach of your dreams. Or nightmares.

Less well-executed than the story, but nevertheless intriguing, is the open-ended style of gameplay. This investigation and trial are mostly yours to run. You choose the witnesses to question, what evidence to submit for lab work, what search warrants to execute, and more. The freedom can be exciting, but along the way to uncovering the identity of the killer, you uncover the fact that investigating a murder is hard. Too hard. Often, you have no idea what to do next and no one to ask for a helpful hint. Moreover, on the default setting, the investigation time limit is absolutely punishing. Do everything just right or be prepared to return to an earlier saved game armed with foreknowledge of where you need to go.

The need to establish probable cause, build a real case, run a trial, and so forth make for realistic and entertaining puzzles. They could also be educational if *Dead on the Money* offered more help learning the arts of law enforcement rather than presupposing your knowledge of them. Suffice it to say, your Aunt Sally who thinks that Jerry Orbach fellow is just so funny may need a little help getting through this one. —*RR*

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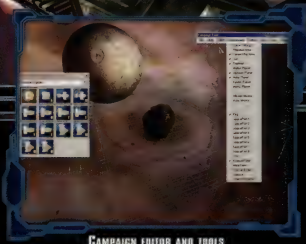

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Produced with the participation of Telefilm Canada

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c) Crowded
d) All of the above

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OUT of the BOX

FIFA goes grassroots

Pleasing finicky European football fans, one website at a time

The biggest company in sports gaming is cozying up to the little guy. EA Sports, which is as warm and cuddly in the eyes of the average sports gamer as Microsoft is to the justice department, is in the process of opening its doors, at least where its multi-million-selling *FIFA* soccer series is concerned. A recent event at the EA Canada studios in Vancouver gave select fan website operators—and a few members of the media including yours truly—the chance to sit down with *FIFA 2003* in advance of its release date and grill the developers about the franchise's past, present, and future.

"We offered the trip to make sure we did everything we could for *FIFA 2003*," said Matt Bilbey, worldwide product manager on the *FIFA* series. "The strategy was thought up much earlier in the year from working with Matt Holme, who operates the soccergaming.com fan site, and the time seemed good both to go over the 2003 edition and also to start brainstorming *FIFA 2004* ideas. We wanted to lend more support to our fans, as they have been doing a brilliant job evangelizing *FIFA* over the years. The trip was to introduce some of the key players to EA Sports and to start up relationships that will last throughout the years, through online resources and the community sites."

EA Sports' appreciation of that online community was evident throughout the three-day visit to Vancouver. All expenses were covered, including airfare, luxury suites at the Four Seasons, evenings out in some of the city's best nightspots, and even a Vancouver Canucks exhibition hockey game against the Edmonton Oilers. That wasn't a bad way to reward these diehard *FIFA* supporters, who came from such far-flung destinations as Australia, the Netherlands, and the U.K. to enjoy the Canadian hospitality offered by transplanted Brit Bilbey. Of course, the trip wasn't just about wining and dining. A full day was spent at EA Canada's headquarters, trying out *FIFA 2003* against both the computer and each other, and then sitting down to discuss everything with four members of the design team. According to Bilbey, the developers got as much out of the visit as the guests.

"For the development team, this was a great opportunity to talk face-to-face with some true hardcore fans of *FIFA* and get some direct feedback on what in the game is good and what needs to get better. It's always more effective when someone gets feedback face to face rather than over email."

In some ways, the *FIFA* development team prepped for this visit all year. Appreciation for the online community certainly preceded the invitations to Vancouver, as *FIFA 2003* was designed from the beginning to support a separate editor called the Creation Center. This program, which is available online as a free download from the EA Sports website, allows users to customize almost every aspect of the game, from rosters to the flags waved in the stands during each match. Further testimony to EA Sports's recognition of its online fans could be seen by the way the Creation Center was released ahead of the game itself, giving dedicated modders a head start in making add-ons. Additional teams and leagues were available online as soon as buyers returned home with the game on the morning it was released.

At the end of the day, *FIFA* fans should feel heartened by the way EA Sports has responded to them, even if they weren't one of the lucky few to score a freebie trip to Canada's Left Coast. Followers of EA Sports's other main series, however, might not feel quite so fortunate. No grassroots gatherings were held for the *Madden*, *NBA Live*, and *NHL* communities this year and nothing is planned in the future. Still, the success of the *FIFA* event may cause the suits to change their minds. Bilbey is hopeful, although all he can say right now is that he can't "rule out" offering similar open houses and content editors for other game lines down the road. ●

Forgotten Bunker

Even though *No One Lives Forever 2: A Spy in Harm's Way* has made its way to store shelves, content is still being created for its predecessor. Dedicated fans are continuing to support the game through the development of mods like Forgotten Bunker. Mike Gehri, one of the map designers who contributed to the *Game of the Year* edition of the original *No One Lives Forever*, has set his latest creation in an eight-level military base recently taken over by terrorists with a nuclear weapon. Secret agent Cate Archer has been replaced with American counterpart Jack Anderson, and the original game has been augmented with new skins, textures, sound effects, voices, and music. You can find the mod in the downloads section of the NOLF Girl and Unity HQ websites.

NOLF GIRL
www.nolfgirl.com
UNITY HQ
www.unityhq.com

Get Medieval Without Ving Rhames

If you're still having fun in the blood and mud of *Medieval: Total War*, surf over to TotalWar.org for mods and add-ons. The Creative Assembly has built a strong cult following for the game, and a small but growing selection of mods includes a number of full strategic campaigns, customized battles, adjusted units, and a few utilities. Sticklers for historical accuracy should be sure to check out John "Paladin" Theo's 1092 Early mod, as it uses a more authentic map than the one featured in the Early Period of the game. It also moves the date to 1092, redistributes land where appropriate for this new time period, adds four new playable factions, and adjusts unit deployment in certain regions.

TOTALWAR.ORG
www.totalwar.org

Warhammer for Red Alert 2

Fans of Games Workshop might want to check out the *Warhammer 40K* total conversion for *Red Alert 2*. Freeze, Lt. Zack, Rodman49, and Visceroidgod are planning to release six separate mods, slowly building to a complete depiction of all the races in the *Warhammer* universe. Version one, which features the Space Marines and Chaos factions, is already available for download from The Zone 2.0 website. Over two dozen infantry and vehicle types are included for each race, along with a wide range of unique structures.

THE ZONE 2.0
wh40k.federationstudios.net

Bloody Good

Mathieu "Elric" Olivier and a team of 11 volunteers are bringing Monolith's gory 1997 shooter *Blood* ported to the true 3D world of the *Quake* engine. Transfusion will eventually feature *Blood* in its entirety, including all of the single-player levels from both the original game and its *Plasma Pak* expansion. The multiplayer modes have already been completed and are available for free download at the official Transfusion website. Bot support has been added with the use of the FrikBot X system. Monolith CEO Jason Hall has given his blessing to the project, so Olivier and his associates have been able to use authentic art and design elements, along with the original soundtrack. Also, because Transfusion is based on the open source code *Quake* engine, you don't have to have a copy of any particular game in order to play it.

TRANSFUSION OFFICIAL SITE
www.planetblood.com/qblood

Coming up Aces

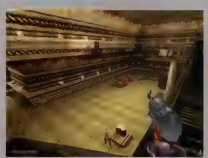
Not every mod is compressed with WinZip these days, so you might want to consider downloading WinAce. The shareware program costs just $29 and it supports a wide range of compression types, like the eternally popular ZIP format and the newly popular RAR. You can download a trial version of the program by visiting the WinAce.com website.

WINACE.COM
www.winace.com

BARGAIN BIN

No One Lives Forever

Less than $20 will get you a trip back to the swinging Sixties and a date with superspy Cate Archer in *No One Lives Forever: Game of the Year Edition*. The first-person shooter has lengthy cutscenes and a sense of humor that takes dry wit to Saharan extremes, but its stylish design and innovative helps are often superb. [Sierra/2000]



Explore Mike Gehri's Forgotten Bunker for No One Lives Forever. >>> Warhammer 40K takes over Red Alert 2. >>> A gory shooter returns with the help of the Quake engine.

On Morrowind and Freedom Force

Todd Howard of Bethesda Softworks and Jonathan Chey of Irrational Games look back at their latest releases

by Andrew S. Bub

Todd Howard knows *hardcore role-playing. Currently he helms led the design team for the long awaited Elder Scrolls III: Morrowind, a game that charms fans with its size, scope, and unparalleled freedom of movement and action. Sometimes dubbed a "massively single-player" game, it's the standard-bearer for a now rare kind of role-playing. We sat down with Howard to chat about the world of Tamriel, it's inception, and its reception.*

Morrowind is a gigantic game. When making a game this large, where do you begin?

With a game like this, you have tons of features and a huge world. So we'll have one group work on what the world is full of and how the various factions live and feel about each other. The other people are giving thought to specific game features and game systems, such as skill systems and how exactly you buy goods. We usually start with an enormous pile and then whittle it down.

There has also been a lot of talk about performance. Despite powerful graphics cards the game seems almost entirely bound by CPU speed. Knowing what you know now, could the engine have gone in a direction that produced a much smoother experience for everyone?

The visuals are bound by the graphics card, so with a powerful video card you won't be limited by that. At the same time, the game really has some serious AI and world data to crunch. We track how everyone feels about you and each other, status of quests and so forth. That part is CPU bound. So it really needs both. We probably could have skewed the game to a more static environment, which would make things render faster, but at a loss of features and increased load times.

Some have said that *Morrowind* has already fallen off the radar and that this is due to its lack of multiplayer. Was it ever considered as a feature?

It was never really considered. I mean, we talked about it a lot, why we didn't want to do it. It's rare these days, with games being so focused, to create a world-class single player game and a world-class multiplayer game in the same package. You have to choose what your priorities are and stay focused. I'm glad we stuck with single-player.

Has the Xbox version been a financial success? Was it worth the effort?

It's been huge on Xbox and extremely successful for us, more than I thought it would. I actually lost a big bet with our President on that one. Well worth the effort, great experience and I'd love to do more console games.

Have you been pleased with the mod community thus far?

Really happy. It's our favorite thing. I actually think the Construction Set is better than the game. I geek-out over tools. I really don't know why. It's been great, our biggest fan site has had over 1 million plugin downloads! That boggles my mind. I think our plugin system allows people to try things out easily, which is good. I'm mostly surprised by just how many plugins people play with at once, like 20 to 30 loaded and everything works.

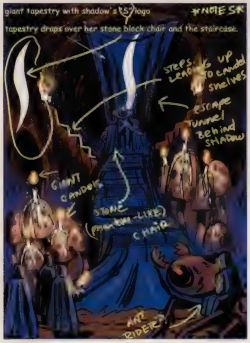
Some have speculated that *Morrowind* was Bethesda's "make or break" project. Would you say that there was a company riding on the success of this game?

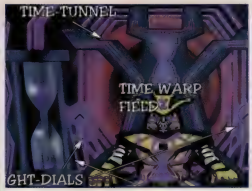
I saw it that way, as much for Bethesda as the *Elder Scrolls* series. And it got a lot of hype, which you worry about living up to as a developer, so we're very happy and humbled by all the praise.

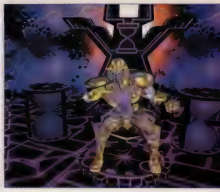
Jonathan Chey and *Irrational Games make games that focus heavily on story, mood, and seem to thrive on evoking emotions from players. With System Shock 2 the emotional goals were fear, dread, and terror. With their latest game Freedom Force they were shooting for a big silly grin on players faces. They hit the mark both times with solid, innovative games that have earned them a legion of fans. We chatted with Chey, head of Irrational's Australian offices, about Freedom Force.*

So, now that *Freedom Force* is in stores, what's the status of the "comic game curse"?

Dead. Buried. Gone. Seriously, this curse was a myth. Superheroes are naturals for games. All it took was for someone to take the idea seriously and a publisher to follow through with the backing. The only real issue that I think this may have reflected is the difficulty of doing destructible environments and good thrown/swung object physics, which has only just become possible with current generation processing power. But I think a superhero game could have been made without these,


giant tapestry with shadow's
tapestry drops over her stone block chair and the staircase.
STEPS LEADING UP TO CANDLE SHELVES
ESCAPE TUNNEL BEHIND SHADOW
GIANT CANDLES
STONE (MARBLE-LIKE) CHAIR
ANT RIDER?





[left to right] Concept art for Shadow's Lair from Freedom Force. >>> Concept art for The Time Master from Freedom Force. >>> That same scene using the game's engine.

it just wouldn't have been as cool.

Did you guys make an effort to secure the Marvel or DC license?

No, we never even considered that. A major goal with the product was for us to develop our own franchise. Although this makes it more difficult to get the product noticed, it does give us more creative freedom in terms of what we want to do with the gameplay and the storyline. Also, we end up with a bunch of great characters that we can use in the future.

Why didn't the game originally ship with the skirmish mode?

Like most games, *Freedom Force* was developed on a very tight schedule. Now, in general, I don't think that's a terribly bad thing. Games can take as long as you want to develop and a bit of discipline is a good thing. This time around though, I think there was a good case to be made for a few more months in the cooker before the game came out. That would have given us time to tune the gameplay a bit more as well as doing some simple and obvious things like the skirmish mode.

Were there any other features you wish you could have included?

Yes, more multiplayer modes. An in-game multiplayer matching service. Costume customization. A strategic layer. Better villain AI. More detailed civilian behavior and reaction. The list is endless. The strategic layer was probably the largest single feature that was dropped during development. Early on, our plan was for a simulated strategy layer building on the ideas that are in *X-COM*. You would sit in front of a map of the city and send your hero teams to respond to events, some of which would be plot-driven and others of which would be generated by a simulation of crime in the city. It's still something that we want to look at more deeply in the future.

Did you ever consider making the game turn-based?

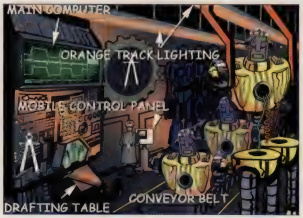
The original game design was turn-based. This changed in about the first month of development for two reasons. Firstly, the publisher requested it, and, secondly, we decided that it was a much smarter way to do things. We love turn-based games, but I think we have been moving away from the idea of doing one over the last few years. I think the design knowledge is out there now about how to build real-time games with the depth that a good turn-based game has. Others will disagree with this, but I think that pause-time or other forms of time control are a pretty good replacement. And turn-based games often result in micro-managing artifacts of the turn-based dynamics, e.g. moving around a corner just before the end of a turn and so on. I think it's time to move away from that kind of gameplay.

Who is your favorite villain?

It's pretty hard to go past Nuclear Winter. He's got an outrageous accent and great theme song.

So, what's next for Patriot City?

We'll be moving the heroes and villains forward in time. That means more serious themes and bigger (more cosmic!) issues. Will Minuteman become a closet alcoholic? Will ManBot come back? Only time will tell... expect to see a much deeper representation of the city in the future too, not just a linear series of linked missions. ●



Concept art for Mr. Mechanical's Lair from Freedom Force.

90 out of 100 "A feast for the eyes and mind, an excellent game and a perfect example of what an MMORPG should be."
Matt Leyendecker, ActionTrip.com
9.5 out of 10 "Totally absorbing, a game that I'll be playing long after this review is posted."
Jason MacIsaac, Electric Playground
GOOD NEWS
"Earth & Beyond continues to impress with great graphics and great gameplay."
Jeff Green, Computer Gaming World
"...Earth & Beyond shows a lot of style and a lot of vision."
Chris Hudak Computer Games Magazine
"Earth & Beyond should offer the hardcore sci-fi crowd the persistent-world game they've been waiting for."
Rob Smith, Editor-in Chief, PC Gamer
TEEN
T
ESRB INTERACTIVE
Blood
Violence
The content of this game may change due to interactive exchanges.

91 out of 100 "Best MMORPG ever? Very possibly."
Jakub Wojnarowicz, Firing Squad
FIRING SQUAD
9.3 out of 10 "As far as MMO games go you really don't get much better than this."
Paul Younger, Loadedinc.com
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REBOUND

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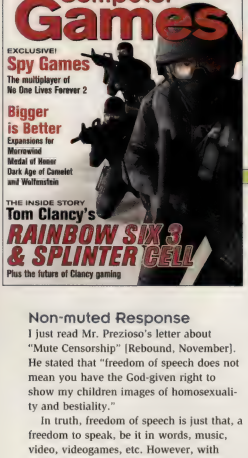

November's editorial generated quite a few responses. Jin Choung wonders if Steve Bauman is "nuts" when bemoaning a lack of independent games. He and several others pointed out a few of the choice "indies" in the gaming world today. Others proposed the notion of producing multiple inexpensive games, which in theory would allow more innovation than one, expensive game. Other readers were interested in our feature story on assembling a PC. Reader Bob Elliott prefers that type of approach as opposed to constantly looking at the next $5,000 system. But we start this month's Rebound with an interesting discussion about freedom of speech and expression.

Non-muted Response

I just read Mr. Prezioso's letter about "Mute Censorship" [Rebound, November]. He stated that "freedom of speech does not mean you have the God-given right to show my children images of homosexuality and bestiality."

In truth, freedom of speech is just that, a freedom to speak, be it in words, music, video, videogames, etc. However, with great freedom comes great responsibility. The government grants us this with the intent of allowing us free expression of our thoughts and opinions. The responsibility is on us to decide whether we wish to listen or view these thoughts and opinions. If a computer game, TV show, or movie wants to include images of homosexuality, it becomes our responsibility to accept or deny this expression.

This responsibility is also placed squarely on the shoulders of parents who may wish to censor/restrict their young children from viewing such expressions. The parents must look out after their children in much the same way they would want to restrict a young child's access to, say, matches to prevent an accidental house fire. Should my children come across material I deem questionable, it becomes my responsibility to explain what they've seen or heard and define the "rights and wrongs" within it.

Incidentally, I enjoy *Grand Theft Auto III* for its absurd portrayal of crime in the big city, even if it means gunning down a few pedestrians or picking up a couple of hookers. I play it in the absence of children on a computer with a passworded logon and installed in a directory that only I have access to. My freedom, my responsibility.

Noel

Indie Games

Regarding the editorial "Chicks Dig the Long Ball" [Upfront, November], lots of stuff is blamed on the constant need to make popular titles to make money because there's so much money in developing games. No one seems to realize that, with a modest-budgeted game, you don't need to sell nearly as much to cover the budget. It's also a safer bet, because if you drop $25 million on one game and it tanks, you're screwed. If you drop $25 million on, say, five titles, you have a much better chance of actually finding that big seller. It'd also allow for some risk-taking, since you'd have four "normal" releases to cover the "weird" game. What really bothers me about the industry is its continual shock when the non-traditional title winds up selling millions of units while all the traditional clones fall flat. After a while, they should see that good gameplay, with a fun or new concept, is usually an indicator of success.

What's killer is all the complaints about the lack of design talent, when this is an industry people would cut their arms off to get into, but it's so closed to outsiders that it's very difficult to break in. Talented people who don't want to (or can't afford to) move to L.A. or San Francisco and work for low wages have very few other options. Mod tools and the *Neverwinter Nights* toolset do help with wannabes, but there's no set network in place. There's no community theater for aspiring designers.

S.P. Drake

Your editorial might've seemed like a good idea for an article but it completely ignores the market situation in the game industry as it now stands. There are *plenty* of "Greek Wedding" type projects that have pushed their way into the limelight. First off, you got a whole bunch of people from Eastern Europe, bursting from war torn regions like Croatia, putting out awesome titles like *Serious Sam* and *Operation Flashpoint*. These aren't people who hail from the hallowed halls of Activision, Electronic Arts, or Microsoft. These are not projects from the children of privilege, either in terms of money, PR or name recognition.

What about a quiet gem like *Kohan*? That certainly doesn't have the mass-market critical mass of a Blizzard title, but didn't fail to innovate and bring fresh ideas to a genre that's lacking in both areas. And what "outsiders" list would be complete without tipping the hat to the phenomenal *Combat Mission*! While we're on that note, you got all the wargamer guys (Koger, Grigsby, 2by3, etc) who are always on bubble gum and shoestrings but manage to eke out success, innovation and a living while they're at it.

And then there are the European developer and distributors that apparently haven't heard that adventure gaming is dead, occasionally getting home runs like *The Longest Journey*.

You mentioned Dogme 95, so let's go smaller. What about *Geneforge*? *Subspace*? Heck, what about *Bejeweled*?

One of your prime responsibilities as a magazine is to bring these diamonds in the rough to the forefront so that the little guys stand a fighting chance, if not in trouncing the giants in the land, then at least subsisting on an art and craft that they often do so well, and at times better, than the big guys.

Jin Choung

Newbie Guide

I subscribe to a couple of gaming magazines,

and have for a long time. Features like a regular guy putting together a system ["The Newbies Guide to Building a Computer," November] are what's going to make me keep opening the magazine and reading it. As a matter of fact, reviews and opinions on mid-level hardware is really much more interesting than "previews" of games or "reviews" of $5,000 systems. I'm writing the competition to tell them just that.

Bob Elliott

The "Newbie" article was very informative. You ended with a note about adjusting the BIOS settings. Would you write a feature about the various BIOS settings and what some of those cryptic settings mean? I hope to see more of this kind of article in the future.

James Konowal

The sheer variety of BIOS configurations makes it a challenge, but we're looking into such an article. —ed

GenCon 2003

As an old-time Indianapolis-area gamer who has been to GenCon a few times (even before it moved to Milwaukee), I'm excited to see it coming to central Indiana next year ["Farewell Milwaukee," November] And as to the gamer who said that Indy has no idea what it's in for, bring it on!

Dave Pickering

Driver Blues

I just finished reading the ATI Radeon 9700 Pro review in the November issue. It covered the hardware aspects pretty well, and showed excitement over the card's specs—and they sure look worth getting excited over. Of course the best engine in the world has to fit in the car to work.

Yes, here's the other shoe I am dropping. The two previous ATI cards I got excited about and ran out and bought both had the same problem. The demos looked great, then I fired up a game and splat: crash, video glitches, speed issues, etc. The best hardware is useless if it won't run your games.

I didn't write this to badmouth ATI, but mostly to hope that you might follow up the review with more game tests. Maybe they finally got their drivers straight. If so, I might be interested in ATI again. A lot of other readers might have the same concerns.

Grant Pasmore

ATI's drivers are much improved over the last couple cards, but they do still have problems with the occasional game. It's infrequent, and ATI jumps on problems quickly, but they haven't yet reached the quality of NVIDIA's drivers. —Jason Cross

You Don't Know Richard

Why is it that a few issues ago, you are all gloating over being so much more mature than other computer games magazines and being a magazine that the whole family and even the girlfriend can enjoy, and then you throw in some article on a game teaching you how to get laid? ["Dick Jokes," November] Real mature. A threesome with a girl and her bisexual sister? That is like a sixth grader fantasy. Its sad that so few people have grown out of it. Look for a little more meaning and love and Godliness in a relationship. It may be a shock to some people, but there are better things than sex, regardless of what today's hormone-drenched society will tell you.

Brother In Christ, Adam

Who said she was her sister? As for sex, quoth the prophet George Michael, "Sex is natural, sex is good, not everybody does it, but everybody should." —ed

ERRATA

We inadvertently omitted the author's name of our cover story on Splinter Cell and Rainbow Six 3. Robert Mayer was the author.

The review of Emperor: Rise of the Middle Kingdom had the wrong developer and publisher. The correct information is Impressions and Sierra, respectively.

The motherboard used in "The Newbie's Guide to Building a computer" is the Gigabyte GA-7VRXP; the article transposed the R and X.

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CINDY YANS

road to nowhere

too many wizards

Why mod-makers really need to take up sports

A week or so ago, I decided that it was finally time to dig into a role-playing toolset and build myself a brilliant, cohesive, amusing, action-packed, fun-filled module. I've lusted over each and every tool and editor included with all the latest and greatest games, and just never took the time to dive in. During the past year, I've neglected *Dungeon Siege*'s Siege Editor, briefly toyed with *Morrowind*'s "Elder Scroll Construction Set," and gave *Return to Castle Wolfenstein*'s WolfRadiant (which has been described as "about as intuitive as Chinese arithmetic taught in Esperanto") the cold shoulder.

These tools are what the developers themselves have used to make the games in question, but they have benevolently bestowed them upon us, the lowly general public, in hope that creative content would flow like honey, adding years of life to their initially finite products. "OK," I told myself, "I don't have experience with the 'Big Boy' tools like *3DS Max* and *Maya*, but hey, no prob." I mean, any number of thinking people can sit down with one of these toolsets and, with a little bit of effort, come up with something reasonably satisfying, right? At least for themselves. Or for the visually impaired. Or for the dog.

My victim? *Neverwinter Nights*. Teeming with confidence, I flow-charted the clever three-player scenario, with over 20 locations, and chock full of random encounters, over 35 engaging NPCs, tons of items, artifacts, and weapons, and a dialogue tree to die for (with full intent of implementing complicated scripted decision structures in order to facilitate the character conversation system). From plot point to plot point, the storyline poured from my fertile mind, through my pencil, and onto sheet after sheet of paper, the reverse sides of which still contain cheat info, old walkthroughs, primitive *EverQuest* maps, and corpse locations. Finally satisfied, I surveyed the veritable symphony of content, including three possible endings all of which presented a highly emotional and moral dilemma, and fully climactic *denouement*.

Then I fired up *Neverwinter Nights*, selected "Toolset" from the Main Menu, and prepared to print out the documentation—hmmm, the documentation—where *was* the documentation, anyway? Deciding that it must be somewhere on *Neverwinter Nights* disk n of 3, I initialized n with the value of 1, explored the disk, shouted, "n+ + !" and repeated until n > 3. No luck. OK, it must be online. I whipped out my search engine and boldly entered "Neverwinter Nights toolset documentation." No luck. Finally, after scouring BioWare's website, I began to realize that the folks there must be of the mind that we don't need no steenkin' documentation. Or they are sadists. Fine.

Back to the toolset. Eureka! There before my very eyes appeared a Module Creation Wizard. "Some Wizards Bad, but Module Creation Wizard Good," I assured myself. I named my new module *I Dream of Gilligan's Bunch* and proceeded to…The Area Wizard. OK, I had thrown together some *Command & Conquer*, *WarCraft*, and *Age of Empires* maps in my time. But 3D terrain and thousands of tile-sets were a bit daunting. Perhaps I had been too ambitious. I modified my original design to a clever two-player scenario, with over 10 locations, chock full of random encounters, over 16 engaging NPCs, tons of items, artifacts, and weapons, and a dialogue tree to die for... After mucking around in the Creature Properties Window, and the Factions Window, and the Encounter Properties Window, and the Item Wizard, and the Placeable Object Properties Window, and any number of other windows, I went and got a beer. And another. And…

The next day, I decided to concentrate on the story flow, character interactions, and dialogue, and to save the physical world and item stuff for later. Prior to this, I had been avoiding the fact that I most certainly needed to take a look at other people's modules to see how they had handled various situations. I downloaded several Bioware-created mods. They were complicated, and after it was obvious that perhaps they knew *too well* what they were doing, I thought I'd take a look at the mods of some ordinary people. They were even more complicated.

By this time, I noticed that in order to use much scripting, you really had to be a programmer. But wait. I am a programmer; rather, I used to be. And you should really know something about the C programming language. But wait. I know the C programming language… The day grew more and more dismal, however, as I looked over the ten billion Bioware-defined functions such as GetEnteringObject, KillandReplace, and AddJournalQuestEntry, and my head started to spin.

OK, that was last week. Now, I'm all ready to embark on my not-so-clever single-player scenario, with two locations, one monster encounter, a key, a knife, and three NPCs that are mute. 'Nuf said. •

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Source Code 17912

PHIL STEINMEYER

INSIDE the sausage factory

sequel-itis

Give the public what it wants! Now what exactly is that?

Sequels should be just like their predecessors, only better. Except they shouldn't be too much like their predecessors, because then they'll feel old. Except they really shouldn't be that different.

Well come on now, just deliver what the market wants!

Our parent company, Take Two, recently released *Stronghold Crusader*, a follow-up to last year's *Stronghold*. The marketplace apparently perceives the game as not different enough from the original, and sales have been disappointing. The same holds true for other recent sequels like *RollerCoaster Tycoon 2*, *Commandos 2*, and *Sudden Strike II*, all pooh-poohed as "more of the same." On the other hand, people criticize sequels like *X-COM: Apocalypse*, *Quake III Arena*, and *WarCraft III* for being too different from their predecessors, and in most cases, the games haven't met sales expectations.

> "As Tropico 2: Pirate Cove cruises towards release in a few months, we can't decide if it's too similar to or too different from the original Tropico."

As *Tropico 2: Pirate Cove* cruises towards release in a few months, we can't decide if it's too similar to or too different from the original *Tropico*. For most of the sequel's development, we've been worried that it's too different. *Tropico* is a fairly straightforward building game with political undertones, set in a 1950s Cuba-style country. *Tropico 2* is about 17th century Pirates, and while it still has a major city-building component, the mechanics of that system have changed significantly. Politics are less important, and a major new gameplay element—Pirate cruising (managed at a strategic level)—has been added. Some fans have been complaining that *Tropico 2* is not really a sequel, and at least in terms of the game's theme, they're right.

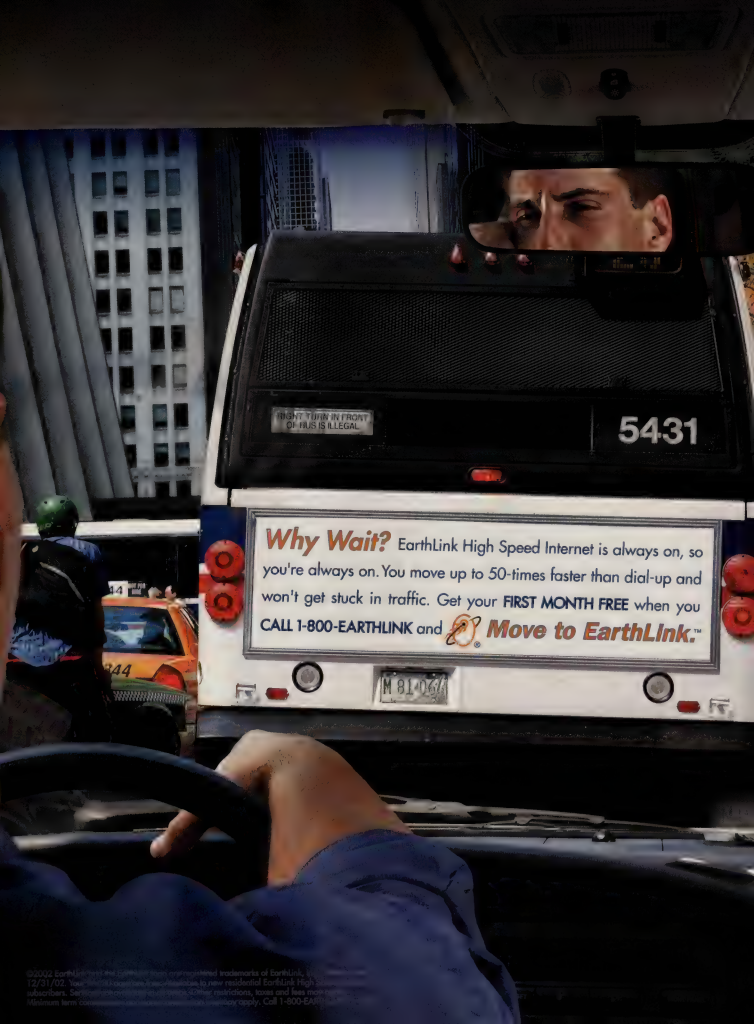
However, as we've sent around pre-alphas, marketing materials, and design docs to various internal groups (sales, marketing, overseas offices), all we hear is, "The game feels too much like the original *Tropico*—gamers will think it's an expansion pack and ignore it." They're primarily reacting to screenshots and the initial look of the game when you start. Both games are set on tropical Caribbean islands, so an undeveloped island in *Tropico 2* looks pretty much like an undeveloped island in *Tropico*. This is compounded because, of all the graphics created for the original, the only significant pieces carried over to the sequel are the environmental graphics, trees, land, ocean, etc. After all, we thought, why remake them when Caribbean palm trees looked pretty much the same in 1650 as they looked in 1950? Even though the re-used graphics only amount to about five percent of all graphics in the game, they seem to be registering overly strongly as people look at screenshots.

Also, we had decided to use a box cover similar to that of the original *Tropico*, a tropical island in the sun, albeit with pirate-y decor this time. We were trying to maintain packaging continuity, so that *Tropico* fans would recognize the box and take a closer look. Unfortunately, the sales team is worried that they'd see it and say, "Oh another expansion pack to *Tropico*. I already have an expansion pack. I'll skip that one."

So we reworked the box image, increasing the emphasis on the oversized pirate character, and distorting his perspective a bit to ensure that the game is perceived as light-hearted and not ominous (the jailers in *Tropico 2* torture their prisoners by snapping wet towels at them, ala Gym Class circa 9th grade...). We're also replacing many trees from the original with new ones that are more in a Disney "Pirates of the Caribbean" style, gnarled up and dripping with Spanish moss. Finally, we're adjusting colors and textures of land and ocean to create a stronger "first look" distinction from *Tropico*.

On the gameplay front, we had been worried the game was too different from Tropico, overemphasizing pirate raiding versus actually managing your pirate outpost. So we've made building up your island easier, faster, and more critical to gameplay. Raiding at sea and building up your base are now nicely co-dependent. You can't really succeed at one without paying attention to the other.

I know that we'll never satisfy all the fans of the original *Tropico*, but if the number of people saying the game is too different from the original roughly equal the number who say it's just more of the same, then we'll be at a happy equilibrium. I can live with that. •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TOM CHICK

THREE finger salute

the sickness unto uninstallation

Bullet, bullet, who's got the silver bullet?

"Look how slow *Unreal Tournamant* is running!" I cry.

My friend Trevor fires a few test shots from the flak cannon. "Dude, it's fine," he says. I don't believe him.

"But some guy on the UnrealRoxx message board, his name was AllUrBase4Me, he said it ran—and I'm quoting him—silky-smooth, without stutters, and lag free. And his system specs are almost the same as mine, right down to the version of DirectX he's using. So how come I'm getting some slowdown in Tokara Forest?"

Trevor shrugs and rides a jump pad up to a higher branch.

"There! Did you see that?" I say, "It slowed down! Did you see that?"

Unreal Tournament 2003 isn't unplayable by any stretch of the imagination. It's just that I know somewhere there's a setting that will make it run better. It's a checkbox in the player options screen or maybe something on a drop down list in Windows' advanced display settings panel. It could be enabling trilinear filtering, disabling anti-aliasing, changing the refresh rate, or turning off audio hardware acceleration. Maybe I have to edit an .ini file or flash my BIOS. Maybe it's a jumper on my motherboard having to do with AGP aperture. I know it's out there. I just haven't found it yet.

In 1994, I installed *Doom* on my brand new 386/40. I played through the first three levels and was overwhelmed by feelings of inadequacy because it ran much smoother on Trevor's 386. Then I realized my turbo button wasn't pressed. Once I turned that on, *Doom* ran just as I expected it should. I've been looking for turbo buttons ever since.

I scour the internet, message boards, Usenet posts. I type into Google a game's title and the word "faster" and pore over the results. Someone, somewhere, must know the super secret setting, the special check box, that latter day equivalent to my old 386's turbo button. Someone knows the silver bullet.

I agonize over graphics settings. Can I afford long draw distances, 32-bit color, shadows, and coronas? What about the realistic wind physics, bump-mapped hair, and mipmapped nasal passages? If I turn them off, will I be satisfied playing a game at only 75% of its aesthetic capability?

Once I had a problem that required moving a slider for texel alignment two thirds of the way to the right. Not all the way to the right, which is where you'd expect a slider bar to go for maximum performance. Just two thirds of the way. Some people recommend reinstalling older versions of graphics drivers. Am I supposed to try every position on every slider bar with every display driver release? Don't think I won't do it. I am an inveterate tinkerer not because I want to be but because I'm too insecure not to be. I'm terrified everyone is getting their games to run better than mine.

This is the hallmark of any performance junkie. We are convinced that everyone else plays games at higher resolution, with more detailed settings, and at faster frame rates. My life as a gamer is like something from a Fellini movie, where I'm the tired old man playing *Unreal Tournament 2003* at 640x480 while everyone else is young and pretty and having a party and playing crowded Bombing Run matches online in 32-bit 1600x1200 resolution at 60 frames per second with ping times under 100. And they're doing it with cheap Athlons, GeForce 2s, and maybe even dialup connections because they've found the silver bullet.

"Look how long it's taking to load," I moan, "Maybe I should do a surface scan of my hard drive? Do you think it would help if I reformatted the hard drive and did a fresh install of Windows? I've heard that if you take a black marker and make a line around the edge of your CD-ROM, the game will run smoother."

"Maybe you should turn down your graphics," Trevor suggests. "Believe me, I've been where you are. When you get to be my age, when you've been doing this long enough, you learn. Speed or beauty, my friend."

"I don't believe you. I can have both. There's a silver bullet out there."

"Yeah, it's called a Gamecube or an Xbox. But we're on a PC and this is our dilemma. This is the question we're asked with every new game. Because we have the power to make choices, we also have the responsibility to make choices."

He opens the details setting screen. "Speed or beauty?" ●

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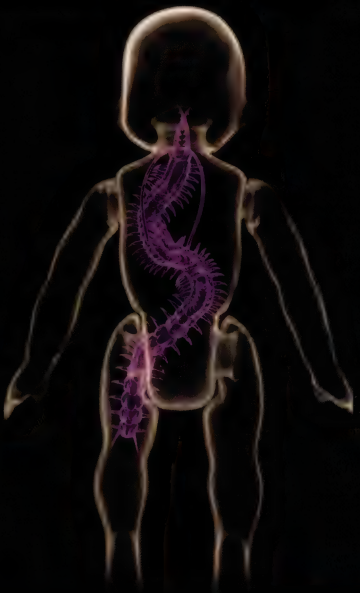

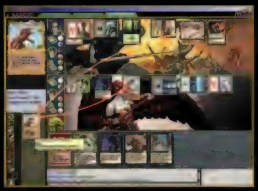

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